

VIOLENT WRITING: A QUANTITATIVE EXAMINATION OF AN UNEXPLORED
HIGH SCHOOL PHENOMENON

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ABSTRACT

VIOLENT WRITING: A QUANTITATIVE EXAMINATION OF AN UNEXPLORED HIGH SCHOOL PHENOMENON

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The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of violent writing in the high school English classroom. A non-experimental research design utilizing a new survey instrument guided the process of collecting data across three areas of interest: frequency, teacher response, and teacher perception of preparedness to respond. A new definition and typology consisting of seven categories for the construct of violent writing served as the foundation of the survey creation process.

The study was conducted with North Carolina 9th-12th grade public school English teachers (target population = 4,290). English as a Second Language, private, and charter school teachers were exempted from the study. Simple random sampling was used to create a sample of 351 North Carolina High School English teachers; 87 of whom completed the survey (response rate of 24%).

Survey questions focused teachers on a “typical school year.” Data revealed that violent writing is encountered but at minimal levels, with most respondents selecting “zero” (29%-90% of respondents) or between 1-5 examples (10%-63% of respondents) encountered in any given category in a typical year. The most commonly selected responses included communication with the student (22%-56% of respondents) or contacting a counselor or other mental health provider (7%-58%). When asked about preparedness, between 35%-52%

of respondents across the categories indicated feeling fairly well prepared to respond, although a respectable percentage indicated negative levels of preparedness.

Recommendations for future research include the need to expand research through qualitative research methods that consider greater teacher, student, and cross-curricular and grade level input.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The truth is, if teachers raised the alarm every time a student handed in a piece of writing that featured violence, most school campuses would be swathed in flashing blue lights several times a week, counseling centers would be even more overcrowded than they already are, and police officers would be placed on permanent overtime. (Roy, 2009, pp. 203-204)

Dr. Lucinda Roy (2009), Creative Writing instructor and former Chair of the English Department at Virginia Tech, devotes attention in her account of the 2007 university shooting to the theme of violent writing. Roy's attention to this category of writing stems from her involvement with the university shooter, Seung-Hui Cho. Roy personally instructed Cho when his behaviors and writings led other English professors to recommend class removal, and saw first-hand evidence of his violent creative writings which included themes of aggression and murder (Roy, 2009).

Perhaps surprisingly, Roy (2009) does not believe that violent writing should be disallowed in the writing classroom. Instead, she cautions of the dangers of censorship, criticizes the assumption that those who produce violent writing will necessarily produce violent acts, and urges powerful organizations like the *National Council of Teachers of English* to join schools, state legislators, and security and mental health experts in a debate about the dilemma of response to violent or disturbing writing. To properly address Roy's call to action, this research study explored the phenomenon of high school violent writing by collecting teacher-reported data on the frequency of, typical responses toward, and perceived preparedness to properly respond to student created violent texts.

Background

Although professor Roy (2009) addresses the construct of violent writing from an educational perspective, violent texts have been carefully scrutinized in the law enforcement and forensic world, particularly when tied to school violence. School tragedies like Columbine and Virginia Tech (Cullen, 2009, Roy, 2009), which resulted in multiple deaths and left investigators using the shooters' prior writings to explain the factors that led to the violent behaviors, have fostered an environment in which schools and school systems are more aware of the need to identify, manage, and respond to threats of school violence. FBI (O'Toole, 2000) and U.S. Secret Service (Fein, Vossekuil, Pollack, Borum, Modzeleski, & Reddy, 2002; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, R., & Modzeleski, 2002) research, completed in coordination with the U.S. Department of Education, confirms that schools should consider adopting reputable threat and risk assessment procedures for violence management, with strategies including attention to violent expressions/writings.

Multiple resources (Fein et al., 2002; O'Toole, 2000; Mohandie, 2000/2002) have emerged over the last decade to guide school systems through the process of threat identification and management. As an example, one of the nation's largest and most diverse school systems, the Los Angeles Unified School District, *LAUSD*, worked with forensic psychologist and threat and risk expert Dr. Kris Mohandie to create a district-wide threat assessment and management policy that considers potentially threatening behaviors, including, "...drawings, writings, and other creative outlets with persistent or intense themes describing or advocating violence" (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2005, p. 5). Such policies play a critical role in assisting school district efforts to identify potential threats; verbal, written, or physical threats to student and staff safety.

But violent expressions are not always threatening expressions, nor are they isolated

to the educational environment. Despite the sensationalized media reporting of school shootings, violent texts exist in other settings and scenarios in which real-world violence is never seen. One finds evidence of violent texts among songs or products of the entertainment world (Media Awareness Network, 2011), amidst in-school and out-of-school writings of adolescent, urban, and boy writers (Camitta, 1993; Fletcher, 2006), and among post-secondary English course students (Berman, 1994; Berman, 1996; Berman 2001; Berman & Wallace, 2008). The study (Camitta, 1993; Moje, 2000) of poems, rap lyrics, and parody prayers of gang-involved youth prove that violent themes presented in written form often mirror real-world violence evidenced in their communities. Violent writings may describe real-life or fictionalized accounts of violent periods, violent episodes, or violent thoughts, although without individual intent to repeat, act upon, or engage in violent behaviors.

The challenge for individuals, particularly educators, confronting violent texts is in the selected response and the responder's preparedness to engage the situation. As evidenced by the Virginia Tech shooting, law enforcement officers, school administrators, and teachers are often on the front lines of response when violent writing is connected to school or community-based violent episodes. Communication with experienced North Carolina law enforcement professionals (R. Sorrells, Sheriff Department Lieutenant, personal communication, May 1, 2011) reveals that law enforcement is well prepared to respond to violent texts in a methodical, structured manner. Officers often utilize the expertise of behavioral scientists connected to the FBI to engage in a psychological analysis of texts associated with criminal cases. The expertise of psychologists who are trained to understand the connections between human behavior and written expression compounds the value of a methodical investigative process that results in a deeper understanding of violent-laden clues

that might predict future criminal behaviors; thereby beginning the cycle of threat and risk assessment again.

Schools and classroom teachers, on the other hand, are not well prepared to respond to violent texts. Case law research (Hudson, 2003; Hudson, 2005) shows that schools often overreact to violent drawings and writings deemed threatening, leaving students facing severe consequences. Overreactions to violent texts have resulted in students being suspended, expelled, handcuffed, arrested, and jailed (Hudson, 2003; Hudson, 2005). In some incidents, as with the Columbine shooting, schools have been criticized for the opposite response; a lack of response. A high school English teacher from Columbine faced a law suit focused on the notion that the school had prior warning of the pending tragedy and failed to act (Langman, 2009).

While schools sometimes overreact, instructors tend to approach the response and assessment process in a subjective manner that may lead to censorship of uncomfortable topics (Fletcher, 2006). Research addressing instructor response to violent themes has previously been situated within the greater context of teacher instruction and response to traumatic student writings (MacCurdy, 2000); risky writing (Berman, 2001); and boy writings (Fletcher, 2006). Other research has considered assessment decision-making processes concerning texts with violent markers (Davidson, Howell, & Hoekema, 2000). In some of the highlighted studies, the writing under consideration was unusual or unsettling, but not necessarily violent. Yet teacher discomfort or disagreement with the proper place of violent or disturbing themes exists, as evidenced by the on-going post-secondary English debate (Bartholomae, 1995) about the appropriateness of personal student writing in the classroom.

At the heart of the debate regarding allowance of personal and sometimes violent student voices in the academic setting is the issue of preparedness. Are law enforcement, school, and instructional personnel prepared, or do they feel prepared, to respond properly to these texts? Research indicates that law enforcement is most prepared, thanks to their understanding of violent indicators evidenced through a phenomenon known as leakage (O'Toole, 2000). Schools and teachers, though, remain scattered and subjective in the process of response, largely due to fragmented conversations (Newman, 2004) and connections. But few researchers have attempted, through a quantitative lens, or without the impetus of a real-life violent episode, to understand the phenomenon of violent writing and associated response within the academic, non-criminal, safe environment of typical American high schools.

Statement of the Problem

Although tragedies like Columbine (Cullen, 2009), and Virginia Tech (Roy, 2009) brought national attention to student created violent texts within academic and domestic settings, little quantitative research to date has focused on the in-school secondary phenomenon as encountered by the average public school teacher. Current proof of the existence of violent writing, particularly in academic settings, is weakened by the lack of a generally accepted definition or recognized typology, making prior studies ineffective for framing the extent of the phenomenon (frequency), the range of typical teacher responses (response), and study of teacher perceived preparedness to respond properly to violent texts (preparedness).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to provide a working definition and associated typology

for the construct of *violent writing* within educational environments in order to study the frequency of violent writing examples, typical teacher responses to the examples, and teacher perception of preparedness to respond to student created violent texts. The study was conducted within the context of the North Carolina public high school English classroom.

The following research questions provided direction for the study:

1. How frequently do high school English teachers encounter violent writing among the 9th-12th grade students enrolled in English class?
2. What are the typical responses of high school English teachers who encounter violent writing?
3. Do high school English teachers feel prepared to respond to violent writing?

Conceptual Framework

The current study was guided by the inherent dilemma presented to the educational sector by threat and risk assessment research highlighting the need to properly identify and address the *potential* threat associated with violent written expressions. Threat and risk assessment experts, including FBI, Secret Service, and private consultants (Fein et al., 2002; O'Toole, 2000; Mohandie, 2000/2002) acknowledge that written texts carrying violent themes do not necessarily present threatening conditions or real intent to commit violence. Violent expressions may be nothing more than samples of creative thought (O'Toole, 2000; Mohandie, 2000/2002) designed to shock or impress, and devoid of intent to signal pending danger. The goal of threat and risk assessment (Fein, Vossekuil, & Holden, 1995; Fein et al., 2002) is to use a methodical, purposeful data collection procedure for identifying, assessing, and managing groups of individuals potentially posing a threat; a process within which violent written expression may be just one artifact among many designed to outline the potential level of risk.

The threat and risk assessment process was first developed by the United States Secret Service to improve their protection of key officials (Fein et al., 2002). Efforts were made in 1998 to expand the Secret Service's threat assessment approach to a greater audience, but following the Columbine tragedy, the Secret Service joined with the Department of Education to quickly adapt the threat and risk assessment procedure for school usage (Fein et al., 2002). This new resource was made available to schools nationwide and currently remains readily accessible on the Internet. Included in the school threat assessment guide is a recommendation for schools, staff, students, and parents to make known any information, including writings, that may indicate that an act of targeted violence will occur. But as noted by professor Roy (2009), identifying writings reflecting a potential for violence or threatening behaviors is no easy task:

Fortunately, most of what the writing teachers receive, even when it contains explicit violence, is *not* a prelude to actual violent. The difficulty comes in trying to identify writing which *may* indicate that a student is a threat to him-or herself or others (Roy, 2009, p. 204).

Classroom instructors, particularly English instructors who regularly encounter and address student writing, are not trained threat and risk assessment professionals. As indicated by the post-secondary debate (Bartholomae, 1995) around the appropriate place for personal or expressive student writing, teachers are teachers; teachers are not therapists trained to deal with intense student disclosures or confessions of disturbing conditions/events. Nor are they forensic experts with specialized psychological training. Teacher educational training presents a different lens than that of a therapist or threat assessment expert considering violent texts from a behavioral or psychological perspective in order to complete a profile.

Furthermore, “violent writing” remains a rather undefined or loosely defined construct. Currently there is no broadly accepted or acknowledged definition for violent writing in academic circles, which makes it challenging to discuss or address the phenomenon. The lack of a specific definition is further indicative of the lack of quantitative research around the phenomenon.

But the varied perspectives or lenses through which different professionals view violent texts does not diminish the potential threat inherent in any sample. Threat and risk assessment procedures and violence prevention strategies for schools include the notion that anything that poses a potential threat/risk to school safety must be properly addressed. Yet, in English classrooms where creative violent expressions are evidenced as part of a student’s response to innocuous classroom assignments; the potential threats or warning signs promoted by the submitted violent content may be ignored, with proper response shafted in light of unprepared and potentially overworked instructors or school officials who lack training and understanding.

If violent writing presented in educational settings poses a potential threat to anyone’s safety, there is a responsibility for the educational world to ensure that educators recognize and address the phenomenon. Addressing the concern begins with an understanding of and definition for the construct of violent writing, and a categorization that yields frequency, response, and perception data.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the current study rests in the quantitative exploration of a phenomenon that has rarely been addressed from the perspective of the classroom English teacher. Prior violent writing research has predominantly considered violent writings

associated with violent criminals, including the written expressions of prior assassins or would-be assassins (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999) and school shooters (Vossekuil et al., 2002; O'Toole, 2000); or utilized a classroom/community-based qualitative approach yielding data from samples of non-criminal youth in particular settings, including classrooms and homes (Berman, 1994; Berman, 2001; Camitta, 1993; Moje, 2000). But researchers, particularly educational researchers, have yet to engage in a state-wide, quantitative study utilizing a specific definition and typology that result in necessary data for understanding the phenomenon.

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that violent writing was a current classroom phenomenon, although no assumption was made about the prevalence of the phenomenon. Additionally, the researcher assumed that public school secondary English teachers would be truthful in responses to questions about encounters with student-created violent writing, an assumption resulting in an invitation to help participants seek mental health assistance if recall of prior violent writing episodes resulted in personal discontent necessitating professional intervention.

Overview of Methodology

The study utilized a non-experimental survey research design (Creswell, 2005; Trochim, 2006) that selected participants through a simple random sampling process. The population consisted of 9th-12th grade public school English teachers working in non-alternative high schools across the state of North Carolina. A sample of 351 randomly selected teachers from a state database of more than 4,000 teachers was invited to complete a web-based 15-minute survey.

The newly created violent writing survey instrument was reviewed by five expert panelists and followed by a pilot study with a purposefully selected sample of 58 English teachers in a rural North Carolina school district. Survey questions were designed to provide demographic data about survey participants, as well as to explore the frequency of the violent writing examples, teacher responses, and perceived levels of teacher preparedness to respond to encountered violent texts.

A combination of descriptive and inferential statistical analyses included frequency charts and chi square analyses. Additionally, a qualitative coding process assisted with expanded data review for a minimal number of open-response survey questions. All data were analyzed to understand the phenomenon of violent writing in North Carolina public high schools. The selection of the 9th-12th grade setting was primarily driven by the researcher's prior high school experience as a second language teacher and high school administrator, as well as the wealth of research (Fast, 2008; Lieberman, 2008; Mohandie, 2000/2002; O'Toole, 2000) highlighting violent writings from previously identified middle and high school aged school shooters.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

The researcher restricted this study to 9th-12th grade public school English teachers from non-alternative North Carolina High Schools, excluding English as a Second Language teachers. English Instructors from Middle Colleges, Early Colleges, Career Centers, and at-risk alternative high schools were not included in the sample. Additionally, private and charter schools were exempted from study. Generalization of findings to other states or levels of educational work (Pre-K to 8th grade) is therefore questionable. Exemptions of certain categories of English teachers was necessitated by the focus on typical public classrooms;

alternative settings may provide remarkably different school cultures evidencing remarkably different student and teacher behaviors.

Definition of Terms

The following definition of violent writing guided the study:

Violent writing is defined as autobiographical or fictional student writings or other renditions (drawings, etc.) containing descriptions of physical force or dangerous behavior against oneself or others resulting in physical, mental or emotional harm, and potentially indicative of violent or aggressive impulses that warrant closer attention by school, legal, or mental health professionals.

Additionally, a newly proposed typology or categorization of violent writing yielded seven categories of violent writing: (a) Shock effect and gory violence, (b) Victim violence, (c) Self-inflicted violence, (d) Obsession violence, (e) Fantasy violence containing indirect threats, (f) Direct threat violence, and (g) Mixed violence. Categorical definitions and examples were culled from educational and forensic research focused on the in-school and out-of-school writings of non-criminal and criminal individuals. Table 1.1 provides categorical definitions and examples utilized in the creation of the new survey instrument. This table is additionally located in Appendix A.

Table 1.1

Categories of Violent Writing

Category	Definition	Examples
Shock Effect & Gory Violence	Author/character describes gory details of behaviors designed to shock the reader but with no obvious threat implied	Examples include fictionalized Halloween stories with descriptions of chainsaw-wielding figures or details of dead/damaged bodies with bloody images. Examples can also include descriptions of animals or humans being mauled to death or autobiographical texts in which the writer describes the gory details of an accidental injury to his/her body (bones that were twisted in hurtful ways, bloody sores, etc).
Victim Violence	Author describes a real-life incident in which he/she was the victim of violence	Examples include: rape, abuse, being the victim of an assault, and bullying incidents. Such writing may occur in autobiographical texts including diaries/journals.
Self-Inflicted Violence	Author/character describes a desire to engage in <u>or</u> a previous attempt to bring harm/violence to self	Examples include suicide, self-mutilation, starvation, drinking to the point of illness, addictions, etc. Such writing may occur in autobiographical or creative writing texts.
Obsession Violence	Author/character describes a fascination with violent objects/subjects/themes yet <u>without</u> plans to use those items to bring harm to others	This type of writing is frequently found in research papers in which the writer chooses a violent theme, including violent music, movies, video games, weapons, torture techniques, and historical or popular cultural icons (Charles Manson, Adolf Hitler, etc.) Such themes can also be found in autobiographical texts focused on personal interests/hobbies like video games.
Fantasy Violence Containing Indirect Threats	Author/character describes wishful thoughts of bringing harm to other people but lacks a clear plan for how he/she might harm others. A vague threat is implied	Examples include descriptions of wanting to injure someone (like a teacher), burn down the school building, or watch someone die, but without specifics. Such writing often contains the phrase, "If I could I would..." or "One of these days I'm going to..." Such writing may occur in autobiographical texts, including journals, or as part of a creative writing selection.

Direct Threat Violence	Author/character provides <u>specific details</u> about how, when, and why a violent incident <u>will</u> occur	Examples include descriptions of a school shooting, a massacre, a murder, fight, or any type of intentional harm to others, etc.. The writing may contain phrases like, “I will/want to...” and names targets, sites, etc. Such writing may be evidenced in autobiographical or creative writing texts.
Mixed Violence Category	Author/character provides a text that falls into more than one violent writing category.	Examples include writings that display evidence of more than one category of violent writing. It may, for example, include both obsession and direct threat violence. Or, it may start as a shock/effect writing that suddenly turns more graphic and specific, including direct or indirect threats.

Summary

The phenomenon of violent writing within educational environments, particularly in the English classroom where writing is a mainstay of daily activity, remains unexplored. Although forensic specialists have analyzed violent texts associated with convicted criminals, and educational researchers have analyzed student selected violent themes and teacher decision-making processes around selected themes, there is a significant gap in understanding about the typical classroom English teacher’s encounters with and responses to a continuum of violent themes; some of which may indicate a need for outside interventions. In fact, there is a general lack of research about school violence from the perspective of school-based professionals (Astor, Behre, Fravil, & Wallace, 1997), and an even greater hole in the research around teacher opinions about responding to such questionable materials/events. The current study drives to the heart of the educational process by providing high school English teachers with common language around which to frame an exploration of encounters with violent student writings.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

From Violence To Violent Writing

Accepted Definitions of Violence

Violence exists. It is a real construct defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as follows:

Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation. (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, Lozano, 2002, p. 5)

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Violence, n.d.) similarly defines “violence” as the “...exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse ” or “...intense, turbulent, or furious and often destructive action or force” (para. 1), and the United States Secret Service (Fein, Vossekuil, and Holden, 1995) identifies violence as a “process” and an “act” (p. 3).

Understanding the construct of violence through commonly accepted definitions is a precursor to understanding and recommending a construct definition for the phenomenon of violent writing. The text that follows briefly explores violence in real-world settings, with particular attention given to the subset of school violence. Forensic research from violent episodes (including school shootings) is coupled with evidence of violent texts from in-school and out-of school settings to integrate the WHO’s definition of violence into a specifically academic construct and associated typology labeled *violent writing*.

Real World Violence

A quick scan of television, Internet, or print news sources reveals a range of violent acts exhibiting force and harm, including bullying, murder, abuse, and suicide. The January

2011 shooting of Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords (Lacey & Herszenhorn, 2011), along with frequent media and online videos highlighting episodes of road rage, abductions, and murders provide a personal face of victimization for the construct of violence. Statistics collected by the federal Bureau of Justice (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011) provide the impersonal, quantitative proof of violent behaviors, including domestic violence, gang violence, and sexual assaults.

A subset of societal violence is school violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Mohandie (2000/2002) states: “In the 21st century, quite unfortunately, the reality is that school violence can potentially occur on any campus anywhere in the world” (p. 2). Quantitative data from national school violence surveys coupled with in-depth psychological analyses of school violence episodes (Fast, 2008; Langman, 2009; Newman, 2004) or real-life summaries of actual shooting episodes or shooters (Cullen, 2009; Lieberman, 2008; Roy, 2009) exist to prove the reality of school violence.

Although government studies show that schools are actually the safest place for young people to be (Fast, 2008), the perception that schools are dangerous, violent places remains. Fast (2008) writes of the effect of school shootings: “People come to believe that schools are no longer safe, that murderous children have become commonplace, and that American culture has slipped another rung in its descent into barbarity” (p. 9). In reality, most school-based injuries result from sports-related accidents, with reported school crimes limited to acts of theft. Death by a school shooting is quite rare; less than a hundredth of a single percentage chance that a student will die from a school shooting rampage (Fast, 2008).

Although rare, study of prior school shootings yields important data about the phenomenon of school violence and associated student behaviors preceding the criminal act.

Fast (2008) notes in his study of 13 school rampage shootings that attempts to understand these rare rampages is not grounded so much in prevention of future acts as it is in deepening an understanding of the behaviors. Research efforts designed to deepen understanding, including FBI (O'Toole, 2000) and Secret Service analyses (Vossekuil et al., 2002) of the behaviors of school shooters, found a common trait among the perpetrators of violence; obsessive interest in violent themes and violent expressions, including drawings, writings, and violent-laden entertainment sources (Langman, 2009; Newman, 2004).

Although violent or graphic writings are only one behavioral clue in the bigger puzzle of school violence episodes, they are a critical piece because they provide psychological insight into the thoughts and preoccupations of the shooters. In similar fashion, graphic or violent writings within high school classrooms may only be one small part of the range of writings in existence, but that one part provides insight into the lives, thoughts, and beliefs of young people and the potential threats that they bring to the academic setting.

Recommended Definitions for Violent Writing

Writing that carries a violent tone or theme is perhaps best identified by the phrase “violent writing,” although no known formalized definition for this construct was discovered prior to the current study. Violent texts may include expressions of threat towards oneself or others, but do not necessarily stand alone as dangerous. Mohandie (2000/2002) explains in his text on school violence management that he purposefully refrains from using the word dangerous, as some violent expressions do not pose any sort of dangerous threat. But violent expressions may be threatening and dangerous, and many threatening expressions have been associated with real-world violent episodes, particularly around school shootings and other acts of rampage. For that reason, a new definition for the construct of violent writing must

consider current informal or related violent writing definitions, as well as remain faithful to the known construct of violence.

The construct of violent writing exists informally with references in educational research about student writing containing violent themes. One example is Fletcher's (2006) use of the phrase "Violent Writing" (p. 49) in his text on boy writers. Fletcher provided examples of violent themes evidenced among boy writers, but without a recognized definition for the construct. Roy (2009) similarly references violent writing, but provides no specific definition. The phrases "violent writing," "violent expression," or "themes of violence in writing" may be used in psychological or counseling texts focused on helping schools identify potentially violent students (Juhnke, Charkow, Jordan, Curtis, Liles, Gmutza, and Adams, 1999), and in relation to texts about prior criminals and associated pre-attack behaviors (Fast, 2008; Mohandie, 2000/2002; O'Toole, 2000). Juhnke et al. (1999) recommend that counselors properly assess and identify potentially violent students, with attention given to violent drawings or writings. They write:

Violent students often indicate their intentions before acting violently via drawings or writings. Counselors learning of such violent drawings or writings should not easily dismiss such violent expressions. Violent poems, letters to friends, or letters to the intended victim are clear indications of violent potential. Hence, further assessment is warranted whenever a student uses age inappropriate violent drawings or writings.

(Juhnke et al., 1999, High Risk Factors, para. 2)

Such recommendations are consistent with the FBI's (O'Toole, 2000) identification of violent or destructive themes in student writings/drawings as guideposts in the threat and risk assessment process of determining one's potential for violent or threatening behaviors. The

FBI (O'Toole, 2000) explains that potential themes of violence that may be evidenced from individuals include themes of dismemberment, mutilation of self or others, homicide, and suicide; yet such themes are examples rather than definitions of violent writing, and such themes justify the need for an accompanying categorization of violent themes.

One of the more in-depth and perhaps more formalized definitions of violent writing within academic circles is Jeffrey Berman's (2001) text and identified construct known as *Risky Writing*. Although Berman chose "risky" rather than "violent" to identify and describe the self-disclosing, personal themes evidenced in his students' post-secondary writings, many encountered themes were of a violent nature. Berman (2001) defines risky writing as autobiographical or personal self-disclosing writing associated with the concept of shame, although he acknowledges that all personal writings are not necessarily risky. Risky writing is writing that encompasses a broad range of personal topics often seen as inappropriate for the classroom, including depression, grief, sexual abuse, prejudice, or substance abuse concerns. Risky writing is therefore not necessarily violent, although it is deeply personal and places the teacher and student in a unique relationship requiring what Berman (2001) calls empathetic pedagogical practices. Because risky writing is not specific to violent themes, adoption of Berman's construct for the creation of a new violent writing definition was impossible.

The lack of formalized definitions for the specific construct of violent writing requires a return to formally adopted definitions for violence, as violent writing begins with violent themes. Known definitions for the construct of violence imply that violence is a complicated construct taking multiple forms resulting in varied outcomes. At the cornerstone of the World Health Organization's, *WHO*, definition are the ideas of intentionality, use of

physical force or power, and the type of outcome that results from a violent act (Krug et al., 2002). The WHO definition additionally considers the fact that intentionality for harm may not match real outcomes, and that the term *power* implies varied forms of violence, including physical and non-physical forms. Violence, according to the WHO, may be evidenced in acts of omission (neglect) that result in psychological or social harm.

Associated with the WHO's definition of violence is a typology, or categorization, that acknowledges the source, form, and target of violent behaviors. Violent acts often stem from a family member, community member, loved one, etc., and may take multiple forms, including physical, sexual or psychological violence. The three potential targets of one's violence include: (a) self-directed (violence toward self), (b) interpersonal (violence toward other individuals), or (c) collective – (violence toward whole nations/groups) (Krug et al., 2002). The WHO typology further supports the notion that no one category can assume all forms of violence, nor do all violent behaviors stem from similar motives or result in similar outcomes.

The Department of Justice (Fein, Vossekuil, & Holden, 1995) similarly implies a multifaceted construct for violence. They identify violence as a verb – a process involving an interplay of factors, including the environments that may stimulate or prevent a violent act from occurring. Niehoff's (1999) neuroscientific text on the construct of violence embraces a similar interplay of factors, explaining that acts of violence and aggression are best understood through a blending of biological, behavioral, and environmental factors.

Common to the WHO and Justice Department's consideration of violence is a multifaceted definition in which violence is a living construct; a construct that expands or contracts as influenced by internal and external factors. In similar fashion, a newly proposed

definition for violent writing required a living definition that, like the WHO definition, acknowledged the source of the violence (the student and his/her autobiographical or fictionalized expression of violent thoughts); the target (writing about violence toward oneself or others); the outcome (type of harm or violence caused, including physical, emotional, psychological, etc.); and the intention (whether one's writing evidences an intention requiring the input of law enforcement, mental health, etc.). Utilizing these principles, the following definition for violent writing formed the foundation of the current study:

Definition: Autobiographical or fictional student writings or other renditions (drawings, etc.) containing descriptions of physical force or dangerous behavior against oneself or others resulting in physical, mental, or emotional harm, and potentially indicative of violent or aggressive impulses that warrant closer attention by school, legal, or mental health professionals.

Categorization of Violent Writing

Adoption of a new definition for violent writing is only the first step toward a larger scale understanding of the phenomenon. A proposed quantitative measurement of incidents of violent writing requires a detailed categorization, or typology, of potential samples; an idea evidenced by the WHO's creation of a violence typology. Because the construct of violent writing has to date lacked a broadly accepted formal definition, formal categories of violent writing are non-existent. But one might argue that informal categories of violent writing emerge from commonly encountered themes evidenced in individual expressions of violence; themes described by educational, forensic, and psychological researchers examining classroom, home, and school-based writings associated with criminal and non-

criminal individuals.

The FBI (O'Toole, 2000), Secret Service (Vossekuil et al., 2002) and multiple authors (Cullen, 2009; Fast, 2008; Lieberman 2008; Roy, 2009; Mohandie, 2000/2002) addressing the theme of prior school shootings or school violence emphasize violent expressions among prior school shooters. The Secret Service's (Vossekuil et al., 2002) analysis of school shooters uncovered school assignments, personal diaries/journals, and internet postings containing graphic and violent thoughts. Writings further included references to bombs or bomb making (Fast, 2008; Langman, 2009); violent media, including obsessive interests in violent music, films, books, or video games (Langman, 2009; Mohandie, 2000/2002; Vossekuil et al., 2002); suicidal and homicidal thoughts (O'Toole, 2000); anger stemming from prior episodes of bullying or harassing behaviors, and descriptions or drawings showing harm to others (Mohandie, 2000/2002), including fantasy descriptions of violent behaviors, as evidenced from Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho (Roy, 2009).

Common to Secret Service research of violent perpetrators, including school shooters and prior or would-be assassins, involves the identification of indirect and direct verbal and written threats. A Secret Service study (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999) of the pre-attack behaviors of 83 individuals who previously threatened to harm prominent public figures, including presidents, judges, and celebrities, found that 64% of the 83 attackers (approximately 53 perpetrators) had a history of communicating direct or indirect threats about their target, with 18% (14 perpetrators) communicating threats in the form of journal writing. Mohandie (2000/2002) explains that direct or indirect threats warn of a student's potential for violence in a school setting; as any articulation of plans to commit violence, whether directly stated or conveyed through fantasy expressions, shows that someone has or is considering violence as

a solution to their problem. Because the FBI (O'Toole, 2000) identifies four categories of threats, including indirect and direct threats, any writing sample that expresses indirect or direct threat intentions merits consideration and incorporation into a new typology of violent writing within academic settings.

In similar fashion to forensic research, educational research considering the in-school and out-of-school writings of non-criminal students reveals that students, when given the opportunity to write freely, often divulge violent themes. Themes may include suicide and self-mutilation (Berman, 1994; Berman, 1996; Berman & Wallace, 2008; O'Toole, 2000), fascination with homicide or serial killers (Barron, 2007; Morgan, 1998), fights or aggressive behaviors (Berman, 1994; Lankford, 1992), and sexual abuse episodes (Barron, 2007; Berman, 1994). Adolescent youth also evidence gross or horror themes of violence, including horror stories from adolescent boy writers (Fletcher, 2006).

The evidenced violent themes emerging from criminal and non-criminal writers, combined with current FBI (O'Toole, 2000) categorizations of types of threats and levels of risk leads to a writing categorization consisting of seven categories:

- Shock Effect & Gory Violence
- Victim Violence
- Self-inflicted Violence
- Obsession Violence
- Fantasy Writing Containing Indirect Threats
- Direct Threat Violence
- Mixed Violence

The inclusion of a category of *mixed violence* assumes writings that fall across multiple

categories, as even the WHO (Krug et al., 2002) explains that violent behaviors do not necessarily fall into easily identified categories. Evidence of each of these themes of violent expression is detailed throughout the remainder of chapter two, with an expanded typology described at the end of the chapter.

Existence of Violent Writing

Evidence of Violent Writing in Pop Culture

The act of writing is a powerful, transforming process that promotes healing from trauma, violence, or other life challenges (DeSalvo, 1999). Although DeSalvo understands that many people do not enjoy or want to take the time to write, she explains that writing can be viewed as a necessary and significant act that synthesizes our thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a manner that promotes spiritual, emotional, and psychic wholeness. Personal written expressions that lead to public consumption therefore hold the potential of serving as influential forces on the behaviors and attitudes of others.

Research into the lives of prior school shooters provides evidence of the influencing nature on thoughts/behaviors/self-selected writing topics of written and visual products consumed for entertainment purposes; including popular music, books, and video games. A joint United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education “Safe Schools Initiative” (Vossekuil et al., 2002) following the Columbine shooting and involving study of 41 school shooters representing 37 episodes shows that more than half of studied shooters (59%, or 24 students) shared an obsessive interest in violent media, including movies (27%), song lyrics, books (24%), and video games (12%). Data (37% of sample) further showed an obsessive interest in their own violent writings, including journals and online postings (Vossekuil et al., 2002). For school shooters, one might assert that their final violent act of

harm or attempt to harm was a reflection of the violent laden interests promoted through pop cultural products and people, although prior research makes no attempt to imply that the cultural inputs caused the violent outputs.

Violent themes and texts are a mainstay of the pop culture world. The Media Awareness Network (2011) explains that pop culture products are the number one US export, with movies, music, and video games among top exports. Action movies, which often contain fighting or killing scenes, take top billing over romance or comedy, while violent song lyrics and video games are big money makers. In September 2002, the video game *Grand Theft Auto 3* grossed \$300 million in the United States, despite being initially banned in Australia due to violent content (Media Awareness Network, 2011).

In 2001 violent music reached a new level of stardom when rap singer Eminem won three Grammy awards (Media Awareness Network, 2011). Eminem is identified as one of several artists whose music is known to be filled with hatred or themes of violence toward specific groups, including women or lesbians (Media Awareness Network, 2011).

Examples of violent music lyrics from multiple artists abound. Consider the lyrics to *Body Count's* (Ice-T & Ernie C, 1992) rap song "Cop Killer":

I got my black shirt on
 I got my black gloves on
 I got my ski mask on
 This shit's been too long
 I got my twelve gauge sawed off
 I got my headlights turned off
 I'm bout to bust some shots off
 I'm bout to dust some cops off
 I'm a cop killer, better you than me. (Track 18)

"Cop Killer" (Ice-T & Ernie C, 1992) is just one of many examples of gangsta rap music containing violent and graphic expressions representative of the violent-laden lives of inner

city youth (Adaso, N.D.). The text of *Tool's* (Keenan, 1992) song “Jerk Off” was utilized in a study (Anderson & Carnagey, 2003) that examined connections between aggressive behavior and exposure to violent lyrics. Consider an excerpt from “Jerk Off” (Keenan, 1992):

Consequences dictate course of action. And it doesn't matter what's right.
It's only wrong if you get caught. If consequences dictate my course of action
I should, I should play god and just shoot you myself. Tired of waiting.
Die.
Shoot it.
Kick it.
Fuck it.
Shoot you in your fuckin' head. (Track 5)

This song is just one among many gangsta rap lyrics including explicitly violent themes.

Like Gangsta Rap, Goth rock music frequently contains songs with violent lyrics. An example is “The Downward Spiral” from *Nine Inch Nails* (Ramirez, & Reznor, 1996), a song recorded in the house where Charles Manson killed Sharon Tate (Lieberman, 2008).

Thurston High School shooter Kip Kinkle was such a fan of this rock group that he wore one of their hats on the morning of the school shooting (Fast, 2008). Lyrics from “The Downward Spiral” (Ramirez & Reznor, 1996) include:

He couldn't believe how easy it was
He put the gun into his face
Bang!
(so much blood from such a tiny little hole)
Problems have solutions
A lifetime of fucking things up fixed in one determined flash. (Track 13)

Existence of violent lyrics has prompted research about the impact of exposure on individual aggression. Although effects of violent lyric exposure may only be short-term, one study found that exposure leads to more aggressive thoughts and feelings of hostility (Anderson & Carnagey, 2003). A separate study (Kirsh & Olczak, 2000) focused on the impact of violent and non-violent comic books on individual hostility found that those exposed to more violent texts evidenced a greater short-term hostility when presented with ambiguous provocation

situations. Each of these studies highlight the notion that exposure to violence through cultural products may influence behaviors, at least on a short-term basis. The lives and habits of school shooters seem to imply that violent influences were in some way tied to their violent acts, although not necessarily through a causal relationship.

Relationship Between Violent Pop-Culture and School Shooters

Evidence of the violent pop culture allure is evidenced among the subgroup of school shooters. Lieberman (2008) explains that an attraction to Goth rock music was common to school shooters, including Springfield, Illinois shooter Kip Kinkle. Kinkle was also a fan of *Marilyn Manson* and *Smashing Pumpkins*. Kinkle's obsession drove him to download lyrics from the Internet, frame, and hang them on his wall (Lieberman, 2008). A song of particular interest to Kinkle was Manson's "The Reflecting God" (Reznor, 1994). The song includes the following lyrics, "There's no reason to live at all," "When I'm god everyone dies" and "Shoot here and the world gets smaller" (Track 15). Lieberman (2008) explains that teenage school shooters Wurst, Harris, Klebold and Kinkle all shared a "mutual attraction to violence," (p. 121), including the music of Marilyn Manson, albums like *Antichrist* *Superstar*, and the cultic movie *Natural Born Killers* (NBK). Fast (2008) and Mohandie (2000/2002) similarly highlight school shooter fascination with the movie NBK, while Lieberman (2008) explains that NBK was Harris and Klebold's codeword for the Columbine High School attack. NBK was in fact a cultic attraction for many of the shooters (Fast, 2008).

Additional school shooter interests in violent cultural products included an attraction to the video game *Doom* (Fast, 2008). Cullen (2009) writes of Columbine shooter Eric Harris's fascination with the game, "Victims were frequently on fire or freshly decapitated; sometimes they held their own heads in their hands" (p. 137). Harris believed himself to be a

master creative player capable of highly skilled adventures. Likewise, 1997 Bethel, Alabama shooter Evan Ramsey was drawn to the video game and spent endless hours playing with friends (Fast, 2008). But as Fast (2008) notes, one cannot blame these violent games for causing school rampage shootings. Instead, he explains that the shooter attraction to the game was an outlet for role-playing and a reflection of some of the same issues driving their desire to commit school violence. In other words, violent pop culture products should not be identified as a root cause of one's decision to act violently, although their influence in final violent acts is sometimes noted. Of 1996 Moses Lake school shooter Barry Loukaitis, Mohandie (2000/2002) writes:

Loukaitis deliberately sought books, movies, and music with high intensity violence. He repeatedly exposed himself to this material, accelerating whatever unfolding aggressive response was within him. The behaviors of the heroes, villains, and violence in these movies, books, and music video are thematically similar to his crimes, and discrete portions of behavior are clearly imitated during his murders.

(p. 45)

In fact, Loukaitis quoted a line from Stephen King's novel *Rage* during the course of his shooting (Fast, 2008). Fast (2008) writes of Loukaitis: "...this case is interesting because so much of who he became and what he did was drawn from...fragments of violent pop culture" (p. 34).

Accompanying school shooter attraction to violent cultural products was an attraction to personal violent writings (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Accounts of school shootings (Cullen, 2009, Lieberman, 2008, Roy, 2009) and school violence research (Mohandie, 2000/2002) show that many school shooters posted violent Internet postings, submitted school

assignments with violent themes, and/or kept personal diaries/journals filled with hateful or violent content. Consider episodes of the last decade in which violent student writings were strongly associated with violent acts of harm committed on school or university campuses.

Evidence of Violent Writing From Convicted Teenage Criminals

Episodes of school violence, particularly school shootings, are often linked to or partially explained by violent writings from the perpetrator's past, including school and home expressions. Virginia Tech is a prime example. The murderous rampage at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (*Virginia Tech*) on April 16, 2007, which resulted in the death of 32 staff and students plus the shooter, has been called "the deadliest shooting rampage in American history" (Hauser & O'Conner, 2007, para. 1). The shooting garnered national attention, due in part to the nature in which the event was foreshadowed by the shooter's school writings. Prior to the shooting rampage committed by Virginia Tech student and English major Seung-Hui Cho, Cho wrote violent poems and plays that were submitted in response to English department assignments (Lieberman, 2008; Roy, 2009). A particular one-act play submitted for a creative writing class included a step-father's killing of a 13 year old boy who had previously accused the man of pedophilia and murder (The Smoking Gun, 2007).

Like Cho, other school shooters submitted writings of a violent or disturbing nature to school personnel for the purpose of completing school assignments. Langman (2009) writes: "Too often, however, school shooters have written stories about murderous assaults that they later enacted in real life: Consider Michael Carneal, Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, Jeffrey Weise, and Seung Hui Cho" (p. 164). Examples of school-submitted disturbing or violent stories/essays from previously identified school shooters include:

- Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, 1998 - shooter Kip Kinkel gave an oral report on how to build a bomb (Langman, 2009). He also wrote a school essay about love in which he indicated that his “cold, black heart” (Lieberman, 2008, p. 95) had never been truly loved and that only his firearms would help him fight the feeling of isolation.
- Heath High School in West Paducha, Kentucky, 1997 - shooter Michael Carneal completed a graphic, bloody story entitled *The Halloween Surprise* (Newman, 2004). The story focused on a male figure, also named Michael, who was picked on by the preps. In the story, a brother with a gun saved him and the main character wound up gifting the dead bodies to his mother (Mohandie, 2000/2002).
- East Carter High School in Grayson, Kentucky, 1993 - shooter Scott Pennington shoots and kills his 7th period English teacher, Deanna McDavid. Pennington later indicated that it was his teacher’s continued questioning about his morbid writing that triggered the shooting (Lieberman, 2008).
- Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado, 1999 - shooter Eric Harris submitted a freshman English paper in which he compared himself to Zeus and expressed a desire to punish people (Cullen, 2009). Harris also wrote at least one school essay considering what it might be like to be a shotgun shell inside a weapon (Mohandie, 2000/2002), and submitted a 1997 English class paper on the phenomenon of recent school shootings and easy availability of guns (Cullen, 2009).
- Columbine High School shooter Dylan Klebold wrote a creative writing class essay describing a black trench coat attired aggressor carrying a duffle bag and executing the preppy students (Hudson, 2005; Langman, 2009).
- Frontier Junior High School in Moses Lake, Washington, 1996 - shooter Barry Loukaitis wrote ninth grade poems of a violent nature, including one entitled “Murder” (Fast, 2008, p. 33). The text to that poem follows:

Murder
 It’s my first murder
 I’m at my point of no return
 I can’t let him live now
 He’d go to the cops for sure
 So I finish
 I look at his body on the floor,
 Killing a bastard that deserves to die,
 Ain’t nothing like it in the world,
 But he sure did bleed a lot. (Fast, 2008, p. 33)

Although the common thread in each of the provided examples was the school classroom,

and specifically the English, Composition, or creative writing classroom, violent writings or creative outlets from teenage criminals are not isolated to academic settings. Research (Lieberman, 2008; Vossekuil et al., 2002) shows that most school shooters evidenced violent expressions in other settings/formats, including Internet postings (Fast, 2008) and personal journal writings (Mohandie, 2000/2002) found in the safety of the student's home/bedroom. Columbine shooter Eric Harris (Cullen, 2009) and Pearl, Mississippi shooter Luke Woodham (Fast, 2008) posted Internet drawings of a violent nature or theme. Barry Loukaitis of Lynneville, Tennessee (Fast, 2008) exhibited dark poetry focused on themes of death in the months prior to his shooting (Mohandie, 2000/2002), and personal journal writings of both Columbine killers included swastikas, Nazi references, homophobic remarks, racial or ethnic slurs, and references to police brutality (Langman, 2009).

The lives of Columbine shooters Harris and Klebold illustrate an out-of-school time obsession with violent, aggressive, and fantasy writings that warned of the pending threat. In fact, Langman (2009) explains that the journal writings of Harris provide evidence of a key indicator of his potential for harm; an obsessive interest in fantasy expressions. Langman explains that fantasy worlds are common to both school shooters and other perpetrators, and in Harris's case, his fantasy world of harm was within the context of the video game *Doom*.

For more than a year prior to the April 20th 1999 shooting, local residents Judy and Randy Brown, whose son befriended Harris, warned the sheriff's department about Eric. They submitted graphic pages from Harris' website detailing a threat to kill. Their repeated contacts included at least 15 separate appeals to law enforcement to address the growing concern about Harris's behavior or potential behavior (Cullen, 2009).

Local FBI Supervisory Special Agent Dr. Dave Fuselier, a trained terrorism expert,

clinical psychologist, and one of the nation's premiere hostage negotiators, was the first FBI agent on the scene at Columbine High School (Cullen, 2009). Insight to the Columbine tragedy began to evolve about one week after the shooting when an ATF agent quoted a line from one of Harris's home journals. The journal was filled with hateful ideas and plans to commit the shooting. A total of sixteen hand-written pages with drawings and sketches filled the perpetrator's home journal. The entries were more explicit than his website (Cullen, 2009). Cullen (2009) writes that the journals were "angry and deeply reflective," and "candid about the urges driving Eric to kill" (p. 170). Harris's partner in crime, Klebold, evidenced similar dangerous journal writings. In the only interview given by Klebold's mother a decade after the tragedy, she said of his home journals, "Yes, he had filled notebook pages with his private thoughts and feelings, repeatedly expressing profound alienation. But we'd never seen those notebooks" (The Oprah Magazine, 2009, p. 166). Considering Cornell's (2006) explanation that the Columbine killers exhibited warning signs of their pending violence at least a full year before the 1999 shooting, Ms. Klebold's claim almost seems incredulous.

Although the in-school and out-of-school violent written expressions from teenage criminals illustrates the notion that violent expressions may be a precursor to violent behaviors, threat and risk assessment experts explain that one should not necessarily jump to this conclusion. Forensic psychologist and school violence management expert Mohandie (2000/2002), along with the FBI (O'Toole, 2000) explain that although violent texts can be indicative of violent behaviors, they may also be indicative of nothing more than creative thoughts. From the educational perspective, Virginia Tech professor Roy (2009) maintains that most classroom-encountered violent expressions are not actual preludes to violence. Violent writing is frequently harmless. Educational research reveals the role that violent or

disturbing texts hold in the teaching/learning process, without connection to evidenced criminal violent acts.

Evidence of Violent Writing in the Post-Secondary Classroom

Violent texts may be found in the post-secondary classroom in two specific arenas; in the texts that students are asked to read and in the texts that they write; although debate exists about the appropriateness of writing assignments that lend themselves to violent themes. History, English, and Humanities instructors regularly expose students to non-fiction historical publications and autobiographical or biographical selections highlighting brutal, graphic, or violent personal episodes in world history. Examples of such publications include Holocaust, World War II, or Vietnam War memoirs. Wiesel's (1960) WWII memoir *Night* is perhaps one of the most respected, yet graphic autobiographical accounts of the reality of life in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, with text descriptions of mass oven and sniper killings, hunger, and population devastation.

Fiction texts containing fictionalized accounts of real-life historical events, including Mailer's (1948) *The Naked and the Dead* and Vonnegut's (1999/2005) *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or accounts of metaphorical events also factor into violent literature selections for academic settings. Popular mystery and horror texts even factor into student study, as Roy (2009) claims that it would be a shame if the powerful texts of horror author Stephen King were disallowed for college-age student study.

Shakespeare's plays, which remain among the top ten most read books in public school secondary classrooms (Applebee, 1989) are quite graphic, especially Antony and Cleopatra (Shakespeare, 1623) presents five character suicides. The play's suicidal descriptions would potentially qualify it for Berman's (1996) identification of an academic

genre known as suicide literature; literature that includes and sometimes glorifies the act of suicide. Examples of 20th century authors who both glorified the act of suicide in written texts and later took their own lives include Paul Celan, Ernest Hemingway, Primo Levi, Jack London, Sylvia Plath, among others (Berman, 1996; Roy, 2009). Berman's (1996) decision to study the impact of suicide literature on the reader implies that such texts were and potentially remain a core part of post-secondary literature instruction.

With academic or personal exposure to texts containing graphic and violent themes, it is perhaps not surprising that student writings contain violent themes. Roy (2009) even uses the word "naïve" (p. 198) to describe those who think that violence in one setting (popular culture) does not carry over into other settings (in-school settings).

Post-secondary English, Composition or Creative Writing professors engaged in the assessment of or study of their college students' texts have uncovered expressive student texts containing graphic, disturbing, traumatic, or violent themes (Berman, 1994, 2001; MacCurdy, 2000; Lankford, 1992; Miller, 1994; Tobin, 1996; Valentino, 1995). Although such writings may be included under the genre of fiction writing, including short stories and plays, as evidenced by Cho at Virginia Tech, documented examples are often autobiographical and may fall under the category of personal writing (Connors, 1987). Fiction and non-fiction violent themes previously received from or encountered by professors working with post-secondary students include some of the following:

- Suicide (Berman, 1994)
- Death (Berman, 2001; MacCurdy, 2000)
- Trauma (Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000; MacCurdy, 2000)
- Murder/Serial Killers (Barron, 2007; Hummel, n.d.; Morgan, 1998)

- Beatings/Fights/Physical abuse (Berman, 1994; Lankford, 1992; Morgan, 1998)
- Eating disorders (Berman 1994, 2001)
- Self-mutilation / Cutting (Berman & Wallace, 2008)
- Sexual abuse/conflict, including rape (Barron, 2007; Berman, 1994; Berman, 2001; Hummel, n.d.; Roy, 2009; Valentino, 1995)

Berman (1994, 1996, 2001), a distinguished University of Albany literature professor and expert in psychoanalytic literary criticism, conducted some of the most extensive studies of personal student themes that include violent episodes. In a three-assignment investigation into biographical student themes, 24 students enrolled for one semester in Berman's expository writing class shared stories focused on the themes of birth, death, and love, with six describing incidents of sexual assault (Berman, 2001). In a prior study (Berman, 1994) analyzing years' worth of student diary writings, Berman found that in any given semester, a significant percentage of his students wrote about a variety of very personal themes: 25% wrote of parent divorces; 17% wrote of eating disorders; 35% wrote of their own or others' struggles with suicide; and 30% wrote of sexual experiences/thoughts, including sexual abuse (p. 6).

A particular study (Berman, 1996) focused on the impact of suicide literature on the reader led Berman to survey a group of undergraduate, graduate students and faculty about suicide, asking if they had ever thought of committing suicide. At least 29% of undergraduates, 29% of the graduates, and 36% of the faculty indicated they had thought of suicide. With prior research (Berman, 1994) showing that about 1/3rd of Berman's students wrote about suicide, Berman utilized updated research (1996) to explain that suicide should not remain a taboo subject in the classroom, and that literature teachers can in fact play a

critical role in suicide prevention.

Part of the driving force behind Berman's (2001) investigation into his own students' writings was a desire to allow students a positive and supportive environment in which to write of events that he says "are seldom discussed in a university classroom," (p. 82), a fact illustrated by the post-secondary debate about the role of personal or autobiographical writing within the academic setting. MacCurdy (2000) notes that the debate between writing professors who believe that "students are better served by writing courses that require strictly academic prose" (p.158) and those who contend that students "are more likely to find their own voices when asked to pursue autobiographical prose"(p. 158) is real and will most likely continue to "rage on" (p. 158).

At the core of what has essentially been a post-secondary academic debate about the place of personal and often self-disclosing student writing is a serious concern about the division between teachers and therapists. As MacCurdy (2000) explains, "...writing professionals are not therapists" (p.161). She notes that therapists and instructors have different goals. Therapists exist to address and improve mental health, while instructors work to foster better writers. When instructors provide students the opportunity to write autobiographically about past or current events, especially traumatic events, painful memories or feelings of danger may emerge for the student (MacCurdy, 2000). Similarly, discomfort may arise from the instructor. Instructors potentially find themselves unprepared for personal, traumatic, and even violent revelations, a concept shared by Berman (2001). Berman (2001) explains that teachers who allow for risky writing must adopt an empathetic classroom approach so that the sharing of personal, shameful themes does not become dangerous for the teacher, student, or other students.

The struggle to identify the proper place of personal student writing is not new, as personal writing has been around for a long time. Connors' (1987) history of the rise of the personal writing assignment shows a greater acceptance and establishment of the genre beginning around 1900, although 17th century shifts toward individualism initiated the academic shift from formal rhetoric to a greater acceptance of personal beliefs, feelings, etc. Connors (1987) writes:

From the 1890's through today, personal writing assignments have remained central to the teaching of composition. Almost every writing course includes personal writing, most start with it, and many concentrate on it. Personal writing is not only widely assigned, but is widely accepted by students. (p.177)

Simmons (2007) explains that the introduction of personal, self-disclosing writing did not fully evolve in the English/Composition classroom until the mid-1960s. This emergence resulted in conflicted teachers. Connors (1987) writes: "Clearly, then, there were and are conflicts in teachers' attitudes toward personal writing....The question of personal writing is uncomfortable for many teachers because it presents such a clear mirror or one's individual philosophy of education" (p. 180). According to Berman (2001) and Banks (2003), some educators criticize personal or expressionist writing for being a self-centered pursuit lacking any critical or academic value. This negative view is illustrated in a published debate (Bartholomae, 1995) around personal student writing in academic settings; a debate in which Bartholomae was against and Elbow in favor of the genre. In the published conference conversation, Bartholomae (1995) referred to first-person student writing as "sentimental realism" (p. 69).

The reverse opinion is one of acceptance. Berman (2001) explains that many

academics, including Elbow (1973), contend that personal writing is sufficiently rigorous for academic consideration, and that to ignore such writings is equivalent to denying a student of his/her identity (Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998). Support for the personal student voice allowed to write of traumatic events also stems from the psychoanalytic perspective of writing as healing. DeSalvo (1999) writes: "Writing that describes traumatic or distressing events in detail and how we felt about these events then and feel about them now is the only kind of writing about trauma that clinically has been associated with improved health" (p. 25).

Viewing writing as an expression or extension of a student's identity and lived experiences stems from a socio-cognitive theory of writing (Freedman, Dyson, Flower, & Chafe, 1987; Freedman, 1994; Hull & Rose, 1989), a theory acknowledging the interplay of social influences and cognitive processes. Sociocognitive or sociocultural theories of writing evolved, in part, from the work of Vygotsky (1978) who believed in the intertwining of cultural and social influences for the learning process. In similar fashion, Berman's (1994, 1996, 2001) extensive research into the personal texts of his expository writing students evidences a belief that writing, particularly risky writing, is a vehicle through which students address real-world social concerns, and potentially grow and evolve through that process.

The interplay between one's culture and selected writing topics is witnessed among younger students in the K-12 public school arena. Like their post-secondary counterparts, adolescent, urban minority, and boy writers provide examples of in-school and out-of school time personal or expressionist writings carrying graphic, violent, and self-disclosing themes. An exploration of educational research among these adolescent groups follows.

Evidence of Violence in Adolescent & Gender Specific Texts

Personal themes involving violent or graphic ideas are not uncommon to adolescent

writing. Evidence of these themes emerges from three primary areas of research: vernacular literacy/vernacular writing; urban youth study; and gender research on boy writers.

Vernacular literacy (Carrington, 1997; Camitta, 1993), according to Grote (2006), refers to the unsanctioned or unrecognized community language of youth that is often distinct from academic or school-based literacy. Some researchers (Camitta, 1993; Moje, 2000) have discovered that the out-of-school writings of youth, including notes, diaries, poems, graffiti, stories, etc., reflect a cultural voice that helps them create social meaning, develop a personal identity, and connect to their world (Grote, 2006). Moje's (2000) study of the in-school and out-of school communications of five Salt Lake City gang-affiliated youth, including examination of graffiti texts, found that some youth created violent gangsta prayers and parody poems (texts that talked about killing, etc). Moje notes that these texts served to both mock and connect youth with their environment. While potentially seen as a violent act, gang-affiliated tagging and graffiti practices evidenced in the community served as a key form of communication, identity, and meaning-making. Moje's (2000) research describes two writing samples exchanged between gangs; samples that utilized a rhyming poetry feature to threaten death or harm to Bloods and Crips gang members.

Other studies have found similar violent laden youth communications. Mahiri and Sablo's (1996) study of the voluntary out-of-school writings of two urban California high school youth uncovered poetry and rap texts acknowledging their experiences with crime, drugs, and violence (Jocson, 2006). Keisha, a 15 year old student, shared poems that included references to bullets, people being shot and killed, and crying babies (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996). Troy, the other student of study, shared rap lyrics in which he frequently talked about the safe haven of his home as an escape from the drug selling culture in which he was involved. For

both Keisha and Troy, their writings were a way to cope with the violent and criminal community within which they functioned on a daily basis. The writings were a positive coping mechanism for community drama and trauma. Mahiri and Sablo (1996) explain of their study:

To the students who were the focus of this investigation, such commonplace incidents of violence-and the crime, drugs, and devastation that often accompany or instigate them-are almost as visible in the streets of their neighborhoods as city buses....and, as we later found out, their writings reveal as much or more. In their own distinctive way, they engage in literacy practices to help them come to terms with these conditions...In effect, they are writing for their lives. (p.168)

As with Mahiri's and Sablo's (1996) research, attention to the in-school and out-of-school writings of African-American urban youth find that when asked to write personal texts, selected youth topics may include conflict or violence. This was evidenced in an inner-city Memphis City Schools character education project in the late 1990s, a project that asked urban 4th-6th graders to write about a conflict that really happened to them. 65% of the youth were from high-poverty homes and most lived in neighborhoods where crime was a significant concern. The sample was 65% African-American and 34% European American. Trained undergraduate raters rated the level of violence in each child's narrative, narratives that provided information about violent and non-violent experiences and aggression. Among the 364 narratives provided, 53% evidenced non-violent conflict or minimal violence, while 9% (or 34 stories) involved real-life accounts of criminal or life-threatening violence (Harris & Walton, 2009). Harris and Walton (2009) used the data to explain that personal narrative writing can be a powerful tool for fostering peacemaking and conflict resolution skills among

youth.

Although frequently observed, violent themes are not isolated to urban, minority, or gang-associated youth. At least one study (Shippen, Houchins, Puckett-Patterson, & Ramsey, 2007) that utilized an open-response question format to explore the preferred writing topics of 8th grade urban and rural community youth found more cross-categorical themes of crime and violence in rural, Caucasian youth texts, as compared to those of African-American urban youth.

Similar to the attention given to urban vs. rural adolescent writings is the noted difference between male and female texts. Gender-specific research highlighting the writing styles/patterns of youth shows that boys write differently from girls (Gary-Schlegel & Gary-Schlegel, 1995-1996), often displaying more aggressive, violent themes than girls (Fletcher, 2006; Graves, 1973; Peterson, Childs, & Kennedy, 2004). According to Fletcher (2006), a former teacher and writing workshop coach, boy writers are different than girl writers. He cites Newkirk's (2002) gender research to explain that teachers often fail to understand the boys in their classrooms, including their writing preferences. Fletcher (2006) writes:

We misunderstand their crude humor. Especially after the tragic shootings at Columbine High School, we fear their apparent thirst for violence, which is reflected in what they choose to read and write. Instead of trying to understand these boys we treat them as a problem to be managed. (p. 4)

Through survey and interview research with K-12 classroom teachers, Fletcher (2006) learned that teachers identified frequent aggressive or violent themes in boy writings; a finding similar to Tobin's (1996) post-secondary identification of male student narratives often serving to "glorify aggression" (p.162). Fletcher devotes an entire chapter of his text on

boy writers to violent writing, and provides survey data showing the myriad of boy writer themes evidenced by classroom teachers. A partial listing of topics identified by Fletcher (2006) includes (author's language used):

- Aliens, monsters, horror stories
- Accidents and injuries
- War, violence and drugs
- “Thug”/fighting/gun stories
- Fantasy worlds (often stems out of popular literature)
- Robots, fighting, and destroying evil characters
- Driving cars or snowmobiles, dirt bikes, four-wheelers
- Dislike for school and/or certain mean teachers they feel have misunderstood them
- Fiction stories-Captain Underpants-like and superheroes
- Aliens, monsters, horror stories
- Mistakenly hurting someone else
- Something awful that has happened in their life (p. 51).

Fletcher (2006) states, “Looking at this list, it occurs to me how often aggression and violence (blood, fighting, attacking, killing) are a part of these topics.” He further explains that boys love to write about war, a theme common to many well-known authors, including Stephen Crane and Ernest Hemingway, and that war/action stories are a way for boys to connect. In fact, research shows that boys tend to be more physically aggressive than females. Niehoff (1999) explains that “Men are nine times more lethal than women, and adolescent boys are already dangerous” (p. 158); while asserting that the aggressive nature of adolescent boys makes them capable of becoming tomorrow's teenage killers. Research

shows that students believe that boys write more aggressively than girls. Peterson's (2000) study of 600 4th, 6th, and 8th grade students who were asked to guess the gender of authors of provided writing samples most frequently indicated that stories containing violence, aggressive events, weapons, torture, etc. were written by male writers.

Because Fletcher's (2006) research uncovered teachers who, like Fletcher, acknowledged that the personal narrative genre so often utilized in classroom writing workshop formats was of little interest to boy writers, he recommended that teachers expand the list of writing genres available for male writers. Potential genres for boy writers included "creative non-fiction," "fantasy," "horror," and "graphic novels" (p. 135-136).

As the researcher knows from first-hand educational experience involving writing tutoring with 4th grade boys, it is not uncommon for elementary school classrooms to provide writing opportunities that touch on these genre, including Halloween horror stories during the month of October. A quick Internet search yields independent sites (Sheakoski, 2009) and public school district websites (Wrentham Public Schools, n.d.) promoting Halloween focused creative writing activities for students. Roy (2009) even describes post-secondary student poems, papers, stories, etc. as texts sometimes filled with "sadistic images, depraved character, the *N* word, curse words, and excessive violence," although she explains that they often emerge from compassionate writers who want to portray the real-world environments in which they function (p. 204).

It should be noted that student, and in particular, boy interest in horror or graphic writings, while potentially innocuous and creative, can raise eyebrows. Famed horror novelist Stephen King shares a story of a male student he knew whose writings about "flaying, dismemberment, and revenge" signaled a sense of alarm about his ability to potentially

commit real violence (as cited by Roy, 2009, p. 198). In King's case, the cause for alarm emerged from the disconnect between the student's quiet demeanor and the level of revenge or rage exhibited in written texts.

Boy writings can be troubling, although writing as an expression of masculinity, strength, or as part of an attempt to cope with trauma is not necessarily a bad or threatening thing. In fact, it is healthy and normal writing. To lump all violent writing expressions into a dangerous or harmful category is unfair. DeSalvo's (1999) argument that writing is an act of healing makes expressionist writing a positive experience. She writes: "Through writing, we change our relationship to trauma, for we gain confidence in ourselves and in our ability to handle life's difficulties. We come to feel that our lives are coherent rather than chaotic" (DeSalvo, 1999, p. 45).

Instructors/educators faced with determining the role that violent writing may assume in the classroom potentially feel incoherent and chaotic. In fact, determining if it is acceptable or healthy to allow a student to write of very deep, personal, violent thoughts or events may in fact create a chaos of decision. Berman (2001) acknowledges this fuzziness when he asks of a student's decision to write about a traumatic sexual experience:

Will writing help her to come to terms with a distressing childhood experience or retraumatize her? If writing about certain topics is hazardous, might reading about these topics also prove dangerous, overwhelming the reader with sadness? Should students be allowed to write on risky topics, and if so, how should teachers respond?

Might teachers themselves become at risk...? (p. 1)

The challenge of identifying violent writings samples as healthy or unhealthy rests in response. As Berman explains, the reader of a violent text may be at risk of emotional harm

after reading a text, and teacher responders may struggle to identify the proper response necessary to protect themselves or other students. The core question becomes: How does one determine whether a text is written as part of an attempt to purge or address inner feelings or creative sparks, or written to detail pending real-world harm?

Because the answer to this question is not clear, violent texts demand a response from those among the front lines. First responders to violent or traumatic texts may include teachers, school officials, and law officials, with varied responses evidenced. An exploration of typical first responder responses to violent texts follows.

Responses to Violent Writing

Law Enforcement Response

Law enforcement officials require systematic and methodical procedures for investigating potential risks of violence, and failure to provide these procedures may cause competent officials to be less successful (Fein, Vossekuil, and Holden, 1995). Officials respond to violent texts in one of two ways; proactively or reactively, but always with the intention of understanding a targeted act of violence. The proactive approach involves a process perfected by the United States Secret Service and known as threat assessment. The reactive side is what we see played out on popular television crime shows with officers responding to previously committed acts of violence that may produce evidence of perpetrator violent texts. Fein et al. (1995) explain of these proactive and reactive approaches:

Traditional law enforcement activities aim at apprehending and prosecuting perpetrators of violence after the commission of their crimes. In most circumstances, the primary responsibility of law enforcement professionals is to determine whether a

crime has been committed, conduct an investigation to identify and apprehend the perpetrator, and gather evidence to assist prosecutors in a criminal trial. However, when police officers are presented with information and concern about a possible future violent crime, their responsibilities, authority, and investigative tools and approaches are less clear. “Threat assessment” is the term used to describe the set of investigative and operational techniques that can be used by law enforcement professionals to identify, assess, and manage the risks of targeted violence and its potential perpetrators. (p. 2)

The proactive threat assessment approach was born out of the work of the United States Secret Service, a federal agency appointed to protect major political figures and heads of state (Fein et al., 2002). Out of an agency mission to protect through prevention grew the Secret Service’s threat assessment specialization, including the 1998 establishment of the National Threat Assessment Center (United States Secret Service, 2010).

Threat assessment involves a systematic information collection process designed to identify, assess, and manage threats of targeted violence, or violence in which the target may be or is known. Proper assessment involves consideration of “attack-related behaviors” (Fein, Vossekuil, & Holden, 1995, p. 3). Behaviors may include evidence of one’s plans or ideas to bring about harm/violence to others, and such evidence can exist in a variety of formats, including notes or diary entries. Upon discovery of written expressions of threat/harm, the threat assessment process requires that information be synthesized with a multitude of other data/findings to determine if the person truly poses a real threat. Violent writings become just one artifact among many that help officials determine if a potential perpetrator could or wants to engage in an act of violence.

The reverse side of threat assessment is the investigative process; investigating a crime or violent act after it has occurred. As Fein, Vossekuil, and Holden (1995) note, investigations occur after a violent or criminal act has occurred for the primary purpose of helping bring the subject to justice. The uncovering or analysis of any violent or threatening texts in this scenario serves to complete the picture of the already identified criminal.

Examples of retrospective summaries and analysis of criminal behavior include the Secret Service's study of prior assassins (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999) and the joint Secret Service and Department of Education study of school shooters (Vossekuil et al., 2002). The assassin study examined the pre-assassination behaviors of individuals who had been convicted of attempted assassinations on public officials. Data revealed that few of the perpetrators explicitly threatened their intended targets; choosing instead to express their dangerous intentions to other people, either verbally or in written format. Similarly, the school shooter study found that most shooters communicated intentions to cause harm long before the actual tragedies.

The retrospective analysis of common patterns of criminal behavior, including violent communications, expands the understanding of prior crime, while additionally building a foundation of new data for profiling future criminals/crimes. In that regard, the proactive and reactive responses are part of an entire cycle of understanding, preventing, and responding to dangerous or violent behaviors. In summary, the law enforcement response to violent texts is a methodical, complete, and protective process.

In contrast, the school response to violent texts is often less methodical. Research shows that schools take extreme pro- or reactive responses to school-based episodes of violent writing, including censoring the writing entirely (Fletcher, 2006) or having youth

arrested for writing or drawing anything related to a violent theme (Hudson, 2003; 2005).

School Response

The school response to violent writing has traditionally been one of extreme response and censorship, often under the guise of protection, although exceptions exist. An examination of legal and zero-tolerance policy influences leading to extreme school responses, combined with evidence of insufficient responses, follows.

The landmark *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969) case placed the United States Supreme Court in a position of determining when or if a student's First Amendment guaranteed right to free speech violated the school's duty to maintain order and safety. While the Court overturned a school policy forbidding the wearing of black armbands and asserted that students do not leave their constitutional rights at the schoolhouse door, they determined that schools could limit student expressions that disrupted the learning environment. After *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* (1988) gave schools the ability to further censor student speech if the censorship was related to a legitimate pedagogical concern, schools gained greater freedom in their ability to say that certain forms of school expression would not be tolerated. In response to the expanded freedom, schools exercised their right to censor.

In the period following a series of school shootings in the 1990s, including the 1999 Columbine tragedy, school censorship rose to a new level. Hudson (2003), a research attorney at the First Amendment Center, explains that while school shootings have resulted in some schools needing to punish youth for expressive content, others have overreacted. He explains:

Students have been suspended for writing short stories, poems and artwork that

school officials have deemed dangerous. Several students have been subjected to long-term suspensions, psychological examinations and, in at least one case, jail time. (Hudson, 2003, p.37)

Ponder, Texas junior high student Christopher Beamon is an example of a student who landed in jail for school submitted work. When asked to write a horror story Beamon submitted a Halloween text that described an accidental teacher and student shooting in a dark classroom. Although the essay contained run-on sentences, his teacher assigned an “A” for the final grade. Despite the passing grade, school administrators felt that the level of violence in his fiction text constituted a threat. The student ended up spending six days in jail for successfully completing the class assignment (Hudson, 2003).

Case law reveals additional incidents in which schools/districts have addressed violent student expressions with results including everything from student arrests to school expulsions (Hudson, 2005). Hudson (2005) cites five cases, four involving high school students and one involving an 8th grader, in which school reactions to student writings or drawings resulted in legal action. In the Kansas Bluestem Unified School District, a 17-year-old female student whose artwork and poem about the killing of a dog was identified as posing a threat was expelled from school and not re-admitted until a therapist wrote a note saying that she was not a threat (Hudson, 2003).

An online CNN news article (Canadian School District Defends, 2001) personalizes the extreme nature of such response with the January 2001 story of a 16-year-old Canadian male student who was arrested for uttering school threats and jailed for more than a month. His crime? Reading aloud to an 11th grade drama class a self-composed fiction short story entitled *Twisted*. The story contained a vision of a bullied student planting bombs around the

school, but without description of an actual explosion. Although there were also reports of the student having uttered threats in the days leading up to the arrest, one of the four charges against the boy involved uttering death threats in the fictionalized story.

Fletcher (2006) shares the 2005 story of two Florida students, ages 9 and 10, who were handcuffed at school and arrested for creating violent drawings in which a classmate was included. He credits the terrorist events of September 11, 2001 as reason for censorship of student expressions carrying terrorist oriented violence. Like Fletcher (2006) and Roy (2009), Stephen King criticizes censorship. He notes that overreaction to violent student themes leads to unfair punishment and censorship. In fact, King states that had school officials been looking at his school writings, he would have become a target of concern and potentially identified as being mentally ill (King, 2007).

The driving force behind many extreme school responses may rest in the existence of zero-tolerance policies, policies that emerged as a result of drug enforcement policy initiatives under President Reagan in the late 1980s (Cornell, 2006; Skiba & Knesting, 2001). With President Clinton's 1994 passing of the Gun-Free Schools Act mandating a one-year automatic suspension for any student bringing a firearm to school, swift automatic punishments for any violation of school rules were evidenced (Cornell, 2006). It was a school zero tolerance policy that led to the 45-day suspension of a six-year old Delaware student who brought a Cub Scouts camping utensil to school (Urbina, 2009).

The irony of zero tolerance policies is that no research exists to show that they make schools safer, although cases of extreme responses show that they have led to extreme punishments for students who were not dangerous (Cornell, 2006, Skiba & Knesting, 2001). In fact, the FBI criticizes the zero tolerance approach and calls for schools to adopt different

levels of response to the varied levels of potential threats. O'Toole (2000) writes:

In today's climate, some schools tend to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to any mention of violence. The response to every threat is the same, regardless of its credibility or the likelihood that it will be carried out. In the shock-wave of recent school shootings, this reaction may be understandable, but it is exaggerated – and perhaps dangerous, leading to potential underestimation of serious threats, overreaction to less serious ones, and unfairly punishing or stigmatizing students who are in fact not dangerous....schools must recognize that every threat does not represent the same danger or require the same level of response. (p. 5)

FBI research (O'Toole, 2000) explains that there are four distinct categories of threats (direct, indirect, veiled and conditional) that fall into one of three levels of risk (low, medium, or high). Threats may detail a specific threatening act (direct threats), hint at implied violence (indirect threats), or remain vague and leave interpretation up to the reader (veiled). For this reason, a one-size-fits-all approach to threats, particularly through zero tolerance policy structures, cannot work effectively. Similarly, a one-size-fits all approach to violent expressions cannot work effectively.

Despite the popularity of zero-tolerance policies, particularly in regard to violence, exceptions to these extreme school responses exist. Some schools take methodical steps in addressing alarming texts, including talking to parents and mental health professionals. Take for example the Columbine shooting. Prior to the attack, shooter Dylan Klebold submitted a graphic writing describing black trench coat attired attackers. The English teacher, Judy Kelly, who described Klebold's writing as "the most vicious story I have ever read" (Lieberman, 2008, p.95), met with the school counselor and parents. Although Kelly was

later named in a lawsuit claiming the school had prior knowledge of the attack, the teacher and school's response involved a more personalized approach than that of suspension or expulsion.

A unique school response to violent writing emerged at Virginia Tech following the 2007 shooting. The Creative Writing faculty within the English Department worked with school officials and legal council to create an English department guidebook entitled *Responding to Disturbing Creative Writing: A Guide for Faculty and GTAs* (Virginia Tech, 2007). The guidebook, which particularly focuses on fiction, playwriting, and poetry courses, outlines the steps personnel should take if alarmed about disturbing student expressions. Recommendations include specific strategies like talking informally with the student and involving other university staff. While the guidebook represents a somewhat methodical approach for helping professors determine if a disturbing text is indicative of something worse, it is a rarity in educational settings.

The dilemma faced by Virginia Tech Creative Writing professors is the same dilemma faced by schools and school teachers nationwide. It is a dilemma of response. In academic settings, the teacher/professor is often the first person to see or receive a creative or autobiographical violent text, so in many regards a school's response begins with and is framed by the individual teacher's first response, a point that makes brings teacher response under careful examination.

Teacher Response

Sperling (1996) explains that teacher response to student writing can carry "many messages" and is a "complex communicative act" that needs to be understood by students (p. 22). She contends that teachers may read a student text through a series of five connecting

orientations that include interpretive, social, emotional/cognitive, evaluative, and pedagogical approaches that ultimately facilitate the teacher's understanding of a text. The 11th grade English teacher of study in Sperling's research, Ms. Vance, revealed her emotional orientation by explaining to students that she was not into reading about drugs and sex because she did not want to get into a moral dilemma; thereby censoring the classroom opportunity to write of such themes. Similarly, Fletcher's research discovered a fifth grade teacher whose personal discomfort with themes of blood and guts led her to censor such writing among her students. Emotional decisions resulting in censored violent topics is not uncommon, as research (Davidson et al., 2000) shows that violent content may negatively impact teacher responses to texts. Yet, for many teachers, responses often fall between a continuum of censorship and acceptance.

Violent content in written student texts may impact how teachers respond. Investigations (Davidson et al., 2000) into teacher or rater biases associated with violent content found that written violent content impacted teacher assessment. The study, which involved 144 urban and rural K-12 district school teachers from northwest Washington, asked teachers to assess four similar student writing samples, using an Arizona State Assessment Program scoring rubric for writing. The writing samples were similar, except for the inclusion of ethnocultural markers and violent content in half of the samples. Final data revealed a distinct scorer bias in the statistically significant difference between the mean ratings of nonviolent and violent content, revealing that violent content texts, particularly from minority youth, received lower marks.

Although tempting to potentially question how educated teachers could allow questionable student themes to negatively impact their assessment of and thus response to the

writing, it is important to consider that the act of assessment/response is no easy task for educators. Although research (Freedman, 1987) on the teacher response process with student writing has identified appropriate or best responses, including recommendations to refrain from taking over a student's entire text and to allow time for continued input, teacher responses to student texts remain varied.

Evaluation and teacher assessment research shows that teacher processes are rarely consistent across settings, (Morgan & Watson, 2002) or easy for teachers to complete (Brookhart, 2004). One study (Cizek, Fitzgerald, & Rachor, 1995-1996) that examined elementary and secondary teacher assessment processes and beliefs discovered that teachers make subjective assessment decisions often based on their own classroom grading systems, and at least 50% of those surveyed were not aware of formal district grading policies within their own districts. Knoblauch and Brannon (1984) similarly acknowledge the subjective process of teacher response to student writing, explaining that teachers often read what they want to read into the student's text and fail to acknowledge the student's intention or voice.

Too often, if not typically, when reading student writing, teachers ignore writers' intentions and meanings in favor of their own agendas, so that what students are attempting to say has remarkably little to do with what teachers are looking for, and therefore little bearing on what they say in comments on student texts...And what is jeopardized as a consequences is the possibility of real communication. (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1984, p. 119)

Part of the difficulty in the assessment/measurement process, according to Airasian and Jones (1993), rests in the impact of varied social and context-specific influences:

It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that measurement and assessment problems experienced in real-world settings, like classrooms, rarely present themselves in neat, well-formed universally applicable ways. Instead, they tend to be rather messy, confronting the practitioner with conflicted, indeterminate situations in which the appropriate solution is rarely clear....” (Airasian & Jones, 1993, pp. 242-243).

The lack of clear responses, or “solutions,” to use Airasian and Jones’ (1993, p. 243) language, to questionable student texts can easily lead to censorship of themes that are of interest to youth, as evidenced by previously detailed incidents. Fletcher (2006) tells the story of his 2nd grade nephew attending a school near Washington, DC. The nephew was not allowed to write about war, despite his desire to write about his uncle, a decorated war veteran.

Teacher decisions to censor aggressive or violent student writings leaves Fletcher (2006), like Roy (2009), condemning this response. He states that censorship or editing of such themes can be counterproductive, as it potentially serves to turn boys off of the writing process. He writes: “Stripped of violence and physical conflict, they (boy writers) would be lifeless indeed” (Fletcher, 2006, pg. 51).

The reverse response to violent or personal student writings is one of acceptance; an acceptance that many (Berman, 2001; Singer, 1990) acknowledge carries risk. Although no research exists to prove teacher acceptance of specifically violent texts, as detailed within the current study, there is research, including debate conversations, on teacher/professor acceptance of personal, self-disclosing student writing. Some English or composition professors argue that teachers should embrace personal or self-disclosing student texts as an

expression of a student's life and lived experiences (Berman, 1994; Berman, 2001; Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998), while others maintain that the embracing of such autobiographical texts is not "sufficiently sophisticated or rigorous or learned or theorized to be of much scholarly value;..." (Tobin, 2004, p.3).

Voices of acceptance include Berman (2001), MacCurdy (2000) and Roy (2009), although for slightly different reasons. While Berman and MacCurdy acknowledge the healing or therapeutic nature of very personal and traumatic writings that may carry violent themes, Roy (2009) argues that violent writing should be allowed, in part, because it is in fact harmless. Roy explains that most students who write violently have no intention of committing violence:

We know that there are times when what we write about draws heavily upon our own biographies and desires. Pretending that it doesn't and claiming that no teacher has the right to report anyone who produces disturbing writing is ridiculous. But it is dangerous to assume that all those who produce writing that contains violence are themselves potential perpetrators of violence....Ideally, each case involving writing should be judged on its own merits, so that we don't suspend or expel students for having vivid imaginations and a passion for verisimilitude. (Roy, 2009, p.208)

These embracing voices for classroom acceptance of painful and potentially violent student expressions exercise a note of caution with their argument to support such writing. Like Fletcher (2006), Roy (2009) supports the notion that teachers must use common sense and exercise caution when merited. Fletcher (2006) notes that allowing more latitude with violent themes does not require a teacher to adopt a "carte blanche" (p. 54) attitude that accepts anything. He contends that commonsense limitations must exist with decisions around

violent texts, while Roy asserts that teachers know when that is merited. Valentino's (1995) discussion of potential teacher responses to questionable student texts acknowledges the varied responses that teacher may think are merited with student work.

Although not based in an empirical research study, Valentino's (1995) personal experience as a post-secondary professor led to the identification of five approaches that professors may assume when reading self-disclosing writing. Her recommended approaches evidence a continuum of responses falling somewhere between full censorship and acceptance of disturbing texts. The approaches are: (a) "Ostrich Approach" (p.8) – Teachers choose to ignore the self-disclosing text and make no written comments in the margins; (b) "Rush Limbaugh Approach" (p.8) – Teachers choose to focus on all of the grammatical/syntactic mistakes by writing comments on the paper, but ignore the actual self-disclosing content; (c) "Sally Jessy Rafael Approach" (p.8) – Teachers may choose to elicit more information from the student about the content by writing encouraging comments on the paper; (d) "Dr. Quinn Approach" (p.8) - Teachers act too quickly and respond in an extreme manner to the student's content; (e) "Professional Approach" (p.8) – The teacher adopts the role of a mental health professional and offers to help the student by seeking out trained counselors, etc.

The Ostrich and Rush Limbaugh approaches represent a tempered acceptance that essentially ignores the real violent content. Grammatical structures take precedence over content. The Sally Jessy Rafael and Professional approaches provide a more personalized acceptance of the violent texts, as teachers assume the role of an investigator needing to know more or to get the student some type of professional help, while the Dr. Quinn approach of extreme response could result in a variety of outcomes that might include

censorship.

Although not specific to writing, empirical research focused on teacher decision-making processes supports the notion that teacher decisions are impacted by multiple factors that lead to a broad continuum of responses; a finding that supports Valentino's concept of a continuum of response. Oser's (1991) ethos model of professional decision-making discovered five approaches:

- Avoiding – The teacher tries to solve the problem through avoidance
- Delegating – The teacher accepts that he/she plays some role in the decision, but shifts the burden to an authority figure (a principal, counselor, etc.) to make the final call
- Unilateral (single-handed decisions) – The teacher makes the decision alone, without consideration of what others or the student thinks
- Incomplete discourse – The teacher reaches a decision and engages in thoughtful discussion with the student so that all parties are of the same understanding
- Complete discourse – The teacher reaches a decision after engagement with all interested parties, including the student, the student's family, etc.

Maslovaty (2000), who built on Oser's work to investigate teacher strategies for dealing with school dilemmas, found that common teacher responses to hypothetical situations involving varied levels of student conflict included direct conversations with the students or larger group discussions with families and other individuals associated with the student.

The quantitative and qualitative findings from teacher decision-making research shows teachers face continual decision-making processes that may evoke a myriad of responses. Whether teachers embrace, censor, or select a response somewhere along this continuum, the fact remains that teacher, school, and potentially law enforcement response sometimes involve a dilemma of response.

Dilemmas of response may be heightened or diminished by preparedness to respond, and preparedness can only evolve through practice. It therefore follows that teachers, schools, or law enforcement officials are best prepared to respond and/or feel the most competent to respond to violent texts when they have previously encountered them. Yet, the reality is that schools and individual teachers are lacking in structures, experiences, or trainings designed to build their capacity or preparedness to respond; a condition that stands in contrast to the preparedness of law enforcement officials.

Preparedness to Respond to Violent Writing

Law Enforcement Preparedness

At 11:23 a.m., Tuesday April 20, 1999, the first 911 call about the Columbine High School shooting was dispatched to the Jefferson County law enforcement officials. As 911 officials continued to be inundated with cell phone calls from trapped students and staff, SWAT teams and a multitude of officials, including police officers, firefighters, paramedics, and the FBI, ascended on Columbine High School property (Cullen, 2009), with more than 1,000 law enforcement and medical personnel counted (Fast, 2008). As with prior and subsequent school shootings, law enforcement officials were among the first responders, as it is their duty to protect and respond to acts of violence. When that response involves a connection to violent expressions/writings, they are additionally well positioned to respond appropriately, primarily because of two reasons: close work with forensic experts and psychologists who understand and predict human behaviors, and a thorough understanding of a phenomenon known as leakage.

When engaged in the process of investigation of criminal or potentially criminal acts that require an in-depth understanding of an individual's behavior and associated violent

expressions/writings, law enforcement teams and judicial professionals work closely with experts who specialize in the behavioral sciences. Even small law enforcement jurisdictions have immediate access to the behavioral sciences unit of the FBI for assistance with this required level of expertise (R. Sorrells, Sheriff's Department Lieutenant, personal communication, May 1, 2011), expertise that includes the work of highly trained psychologists. Davis (1998) notes that psychologists can fulfill many roles for local police departments, including everything from stress management for officers to that of objective forensic scientists who assist officials in understanding hard to understand events. Bush, Connell and Denney (2006) explain that "The profession of psychology has much to offer the legal system and those with possible or clearly identified psychological difficulties who find themselves negotiating the legal system" (p. 9).

Forensic psychology is a specialized area within the field of psychology (Bush et al., 2006) that carries with it a distinct purpose. Bush et al. (2006) use the work of Melton, Petrila, Poythress, & Slobogin (1997) to explain that forensic psychologists engage in analysis or evaluation of specific criminal behaviors for the purpose of assisting the legal system, whereas non-forensic psychologists are focused on assisting a patient. The different foci drive distinct procedures. Whereas clinical psychologists may have to act quickly to help clients in immediate need, forensic psychologists are forced to take the time to properly investigate the circumstances that will lead to an expert opinion:

In contrast to the urgency that is often required in the provision of clinical evaluation services, psychologists practicing in forensic contexts must take the time necessary to ensure that the broad base of information that is needed (e.g., interviews, observations, records, test data) can be obtained and thoroughly reviewed before

conclusions are offered. (Bush, et al., 2006, p.12)

Forensic psychologists therefore obtain and analyze a comprehensive collection of information that assists the judicial system in final decisions related to criminal and often violent acts.

Access to forensic psychologists and behavioral specialists assists law enforcement in understanding criminal behaviors, especially when utilizing the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, *NCAVC*, the center that led the case study analysis of school shootings. But outside of the specialization of forensic psychologists, clinical psychologists who specialize in violent behaviors are also of great benefit to law enforcement understanding. Noted psychologist Dr. Peter Langman (2009), whose research focuses on school violence and school shooters, has provided Congressional testimony and published texts on the school shooting phenomenon. In his book *Why Kids Kill: Understanding the Mind of School Shooters*, Langman (2009) provides in-depth analysis of the mental instability of prior school shooters, making the argument that clues existed to provide warning of their potential violent acts, but they were probably ignored because individuals, particularly school personnel, were not and are not trained like psychologists to recognize warning behaviors.

Langman (2009) explains that among 10 selected shooters, including Cho, Harris, Klebold, and Kinkel, each one suffered from mental health concerns. He creates a typology in which the shooters are classified as either psychopathic, psychotic, or traumatized, and connects learned facts about each shooter's life to the shootings. Essentially, Langman's psychological perspective provides a depth of behavioral understanding that would have been lacking in a school environment. Psychologists play a critical role in helping law

enforcement understand prior, current, or future violent perpetrators, as they have specialization in understanding human behaviors.

Investigative and behavioral analysis of criminal or potentially criminal individuals may involve study of a phenomenon known as leakage (O'Toole, 2000). Leakage is the FBI term for the revelation of violent or threatening intentions. The following definition in relation to school violence is provided:

“Leakage” occurs when a student intentionally or unintentionally reveals clues to feelings, thoughts, fantasies, attitudes, or intentions that may signal an impending violent act. These clues can take the form of subtle threats, boasts, innuendos, predictions, or ultimatums. They may be spoken or conveyed in stories, diary entries, essays, poems, letters, songs, drawings, doodles, tattoos, or videos. (O'Toole, 2000, p. 16)

Leakage is further explained as a student's preoccupation with violent themes that may show up in writings or artwork, including themes of “hatred, prejudice, death, dismemberment, mutilation of self or others, bleeding, use of excessively destructive weapons, homicide, or suicide” (O'Toole, 2000, p.16). Although psychologists acknowledge that student preoccupations with morbid, violent themes may just be indicative of a creative fantasy writer who has no intention of causing violence (O'Toole, 2000; Mohandie, 2000/2002), leakage “is considered to be one of the most important clues preceding an adolescent's violent act” (O'Toole, 2000, pg. 16). According to a post-Columbine *New York Times* study (Fessenden, 2000) conducted on 100 rampage shootings that occurred between 1949 and 1999, including in-school and out-of-school rampages, most adolescent mass murderers, in contrast to adult mass murderers, shared their plans with at least one or more friends prior to

the event (Fast, 2008).

The Secret Service and Department of Education research study on school shooters (Vossekuil et al., 2002) evidenced multiple episodes of leakage. An extensive review of 37 school shootings involving 41 shooters between 1974 and 2000 (Vossekuil et al., 2002) found that among the 41 school shootings analyzed by Secret Service profilers, more than 75% of the episodes evidenced perpetrators who leaked or revealed their plans to others.

The FBI's attention and study of the phenomenon of leakage and other pre-attack behaviors/clues, particularly in regard to school violence, led to the development of resources for the management of school threats/school violence, including a 100-page Threat Assessment Guide detailing the steps required for schools to recognize and manage potential threats to school safety (Fein et al., 2002). The guide describes common pre-attack behaviors, including violent expressions. The authors explain that schools should be concerned about potential threats indicated by leaked clues. Such clues include written plans to harm self or others, expressions of interest in school attacks, or writings that may suggest that the student has considered a specific plan to bring about violence to solve a problem.

Specialized resources designed to assist schools in understanding leakage and other violence warning signs would seem to imply that schools are well prepared to address violent texts, but the availability of resources and expansion of safe school policies does not necessarily translate into appropriate response. Some might even argue that schools are ill-prepared, as compared to law enforcement and forensic experts, to even begin to address violent texts. A review of typical school responses and criticisms follows.

School Preparedness

An estimated 55 million pre-kindergarten through 12th grade students fill the halls of

America's public schools each year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008).

Although studies show that schools remain one of the safest places for students to be (Fast, 2008), violent episodes occur and school officials are regularly confronted with determining how to best recognize the warning signs and address unfathomable incidents. Psychologists (Langman, 2009; Newman, 2004) specializing in the analysis of school shooter behaviors, including violent texts, explain that schools are rarely in a position to know how to respond to such writings. Reasons for school unpreparedness to respond can be explained by some of the following phenomena: a lack of threat assessment expertise, defragmented staff and student communication, and misuse of profiling procedures.

School systems sometimes lack specialized training in threat and risk assessment and management skills. Langman (2009) uses the Columbine tragedy as evidence of a school's inability to recognize warning signs of potential violence. Post-massacre psychological analyses of the home journal and school-submitted writings of shooter Dylan Klebold revealed misused language and odd words, both signs of psychotic thinking or paranoia. Langman explains that a particular 1998 research paper on Charles Manson, while seemingly straightforward, in fact contained "several revealing and suggestive passages" (p.67). Despite the fact that the warning signs to signal that Klebold was considering threatening and violent impulses existed, Langman understands that school officials did not possess the expertise to pick up on the clues. With the exception of social workers and counselors, schools rarely employ psychologists or other staff who are highly trained in behavioral sciences.

Another concern related to the educational identification of potential threats involves a lack of dialog between classrooms, departments, schools, and staff members. Newman (2004) refers to the lack of connected school discussions as a "fragmentation of

documentation” (as cited in Langman, 2009, p. 90), while Leinwand (2008) explains that a lack of interagency conversations at Virginia Tech contributed to the school’s failure to appropriately identify Cho as a potential campus threat. Roy’s (2009) memoir on the tragedy further supports the claim of insufficient school dialog and response.

Newman (2004) uses the school experience of shooter Michael Carneal from Heath High School to explain fragmented communication. She explains that many of Michael’s stories and essays, including a disturbing 8th grade Halloween story and multiple 9th grade assignments, pointed to a young man in crisis. In fact, his writings signaled that he was disturbed. But a lack of connected conversations or considerations prevented the full picture from being seen. Newman (2004) explains: “Taken together, Michael’s stories and essays point to a depressed and disturbed youth. But no one teacher had all of these essays” (p. 95). She further explains that fragmented conversations at the middle school level may have allowed Westside Middle shooter Andrew Golden to go unnoticed. Defragmented conversation is contradictory to threat and risk assessment processes urging broad, coordinated analyses of potential threats. The busy reality of school schedules makes attempts to engage in coordinated communication a challenging process.

Connected to the notion of insufficient adult conversation or communication around violent indicators is insufficient student conversation. Even when students know someone is potentially violent, they often fail to tell anyone. Although Secret Service school shooter research (Vossekuil et al., 2002) shows that a minimum of one friend was told about the shooter’s intentions in at least 81% of the studied cases, and up to 59% told two or more friends, none of the friends reported the intentions to school staff or other adults.

Newman (2004) provides multiple reasons for student failure to report other’s violent

intentions, including the difficulty of determining the difference between serious threats and jokes, a strict adolescent code that requires youth to act tough, especially in front of adults, and the potentially accidental adult behavior of discouraging kids to tell. Although reasons that youth fail to divulge key information may differ, it is safe to assume that student silence presents a barrier to proper response. Schools cannot respond when they do not know that a potential threat exists.

Despite criticisms of school systems and structures that have prevented proper response (Newman, 2004), today's schools are better prepared to respond to violent texts than schools a decade ago, thanks to detailed school threat and risk assessment guidelines and recommendations for school use. (Fein et al., 2002; O'Toole, 2000; Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998; Mohandie, 2000/2002; Cornell & Sheras, 2006). Common to each of these resources is the recommendation to conduct comprehensive evaluations of potential threats and to avoid the assumption that any single product, expression, or behavior automatically signals immediate harm.

But comprehensive approaches can be challenging for schools, as evidenced in the aftermath of Columbine. Following the Colorado high school shooting, fear and hysteria drove schools to begin searching for checklists to help identify potential violent perpetrators, and many organizations stepped up to the plate and responded, including the American Psychological Association (n.d.) and the National School Safety Center, (1998). The National School Safety Center's checklist cautions schools to look for reflections of anger and frustration among student writings or preoccupation with violent and dark reading selections, among many other clues.

But checklists may promote the act of school profiling, a process criticized by the

Secret Service. Profiling is, "...not an effective approach to identifying students who may pose a risk for targeted school violence at school or for assessing the risk that a particular student may pose for a school-based attack,..." (Vossekuil et al., 2002, p.34). Mohandie (2000/2002) explains that no series of pre-attack warning signs can be taken in isolation to definitively identify a future violent perpetrator, and Cornell, Sheras, Gregory, and Fan (2009) write that both the FBI (O'Toole, 2000) and U.S. Secret Service (Vossekuil et al., 2002) determined through their analyses of school shootings that checklists of warning signs falsely identify supposedly dangerous students. While cash and time-strapped schools eager to make their buildings as safe as possible sometimes find comfort in quick checklists, checklists can do more harm than good, as warning signs should never be used to assume that violence is imminent (Dwyer et al., 1998).

But early warning signs are just that - indicators that a student may need help. Such signs may or may not indicate a serious problem - they do not necessarily mean that a child is prone to violence toward self or others. Rather, early warning signs provide us with the impetus to check out our concerns and address the child's needs. Early warning signs allow us to act responsibly by getting help for the child before problems escalate. (Dwyer et al., 1998, p. 6)

Checklists or profiling behaviors may therefore serve the opposite effect of making schools less safe when untrained personnel identify the wrong students of concern.

School response to violence or the potential for violence, as the forensic world notes, is challenging. But these responses are even potentially more challenging for the teachers who face threatening youth every single day of a school semester or year. Teachers are so tightly connected to their students that they may fail to miss signals. Additionally,

overworked teachers often resent even being asked to identify such signals (Newman, 2004) Teacher unpreparedness to respond to potential violence is therefore just as serious of a concern as overall school unpreparedness.

Teacher Preparedness

Specific research into K-12 teacher perceptions of preparedness to respond to violent texts is lacking, although general assessment research finds teachers unprepared to respond to any type of student writing. In regard to themes of violence, research has been largely focused on violent school acts. A review of school violence research is followed by research showing that teachers are subjective decision makers, and may at times ignore their duty to respond due to general feelings of burnout.

Attention to teacher response to violent themes at the K-12 level has been more concerned with school staff encounters with violent behaviors and overall preparedness for school emergencies than to encounters involving classroom violent writing. Collaborative Department of Education, Department of Justice, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention initiatives result in frequent reports on incidents of school violence (Centers for Disease Control, 2008). The annual federal school report known as *Indicators of School Crime and Safety* (Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2010) is one of the more comprehensive resources available, as it reports school violence and victimization data from varied sources, including surveys with students, teachers, and principals. Topics considered by this report include some of the following: bullying, weapon use, substance abuse, and fights. Although teacher survey questions collect data on incidents of being threatened or attacked by students, the potential role that violent or threatening written texts may play in these attacks is unknown.

Despite the outputs of such large school violence surveys, some criticize the lack of research efforts centered on teacher or school staff input (Zeira, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2004; Marachi, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2007). Marachi et al. (2007) explain: “Though teachers and administrators are an integral part of the school life, and play critical roles in ensuring the safety of students, their views and actions are rarely considered in research on school violence” (p.502). They further explain that teachers play a critical role in violence prevention, as they may provide valuable information about violence prevention efforts.

When teachers are listened to, interesting data emerge. Interviews conducted with middle and high school teachers regarding school violence have shown that teachers struggle with the intersection of student violence intervention and personal safety, and may not intervene in light of perceived threats to their own safety (Marachi et al., 2007). This research is important to an understanding of the phenomenon of violent writing, as it shows that perceived threats to personal safety may lead to teacher inactivity.

In similar fashion, research into teacher assessment and decision-making processes reveals that the teacher feelings, beliefs, or philosophies very often factor into classroom processes and responses, therefore making these processes subjective in nature. Subjective processes bring into question the ability of teachers to properly respond to violent content. In fact, Newman (2004) writes of teacher decisions regarding school discipline: “...teachers apply their own judgments to disciplinary situations, and decide when they are going to report or even record an incident; they keep the information to themselves much of the time” (p. 104). At the heart of Newman’s exploration of the ambivalent attitudes of teachers rests her acknowledgement of a dilemma. She explains that teachers have a choice to make; a choice between academic and personal development. Will they choose to foster academic

achievement or focus on the social-emotional component of nurturing the child? Growing educational demands and the dilemma of figuring out whether the teacher should play the role of teacher or therapist drives decisions that may rest in poorly determined reasons.

Both disciplinary and academic dilemmas may result in subjective teacher decisions. Educational teacher assessment research supports the conclusion that teachers approach the student assessment process under the pressure of competing influences that result in subjective decisions. Teachers are frequently frustrated (Harris, 1977) and uncomfortable with the act of assessing student work, due in part to a lack of proper assessment training (Zhang & Burry-Stock, 2003), and tend to use a variety of grading practices (Brookhart, 1994). Barnes' (1985) study (as cited in Brookhart, 2004) of 20 student teachers and 20 cooperating K-12 teachers showed that teacher assessment concerns include a general lack of evaluation skills, knowledge, and feelings of unresolved conflicts regarding which assessment criteria to use. Further study shows that teacher comments on student writings are primarily vague (Beach & Friedrich, 2006), and secondary teachers often favor female writings over male writings (Roen, 1992; as cited in Tobin, 1996). In Miller's (1994) discussion of varied professor responses to a gay-bashing student essay he explains that teachers are simply pedagogically untrained to know how to respond to student writing.

...these...lines of response...dramatize how little professional training in English studies prepares teachers to read and respond to the kinds of parodic, critical, oppositional, dismissive, resistant, transgressive, and regressive writing that gets produced by students writing in the contact zone in the classroom. This absence of preparation, I would argue, actually comes into play every time a teacher sits down to comment on a student paper;... (p.394).

A series of Australian studies (Wyatt-Smith, 1999; Wyatt-Smith & Castleton, 2005, Cooksey, Freebody, and Wyatt-Smith, 2007) designed to examine teacher judgment found that the assessment of student writing is essentially a subjective response of judgment in which teachers rarely adhere to standardized criteria across repeated student assessments. After a series of interviews and think-aloud assessment sessions with grade five classroom teachers asked to assess samples of student writing, Wyatt-Smith and Castleton (2005) determined: “There is no simple, linear course that teachers follow to arrive at their judgments. On the contrary, what emerges is a picture of how dynamically networked indexes come into (and out of) play in acts of judgement” (p. 135). Similar research within the field of teacher decision-making processes finds that professional teacher decisions are impacted by multiple factors. Oser (1991) argued that teacher decisions represent a constant interplay between the ethics of care, justice, and truth.

Subjective decision-making processes are further complicated by teachers who are too overwhelmed to care about making proper responses, a fact highlighted by Mohandie (2000/2002). He writes:

A final school risk factor is the situation where faculty and staff refuse to respond and intervene due to apathy, ignorance, burnout, or fear. Teachers and educators are grossly underpaid relative to the important socialization task with which they are involved. Now teachers are tasked with yet another role: early warning recognition and intervention. Some may not care anymore, burned out by ceaseless demands and a lack of appreciation, Some may be downright afraid to get involved. If these factors exist in any school, then school violence risk is enhanced. (Mohandie, 2000/2002, p. 59)

Newman (2004) similarly addresses the matter of teacher apathy as a barrier to proper instructor response. Interviews with school staff from schools involved with two prior school shootings found mixed teacher and administrator views on the role that teachers should play. In fact, Newman explains that many teachers resent the notion of having to be counselors to youth, as they already feel “underqualified and overwhelmed by the increasing demands of their jobs” (p. 105).

A school’s ability to respond to violence rests ultimately in the preparedness and willingness of its staff to properly engage in accurate identification of warning signs from potentially violent youth. When overworked and underpaid teachers perceive that they are being asked to do yet one more thing related to their professional duties, or that their opinions are not valued, walls of resistance may appear. Roy’s (2009) memoir of the Virginia Tech shooting reveals her frustration with a university system that would not listen well or respond properly to what she perceived was a serious problem with the shooter.

To argue that all teachers faced with increasing stresses and demands are too subjective in their classroom assessment and decision-making processes and thus unprepared to respond properly to episodes of violent texts would be an unfair generalization. Some teachers, like Roy (2009), want to respond well and develop strong pedagogical practices of response (Miller, 1994), but strong responses require that teachers and their school organizations properly understand the distinction between alarming/threatening and non-threatening violent texts requiring different levels of response. The distinction is rarely clear for the educational sector. In that regard, the current study’s attempt to create a detailed categorization of violent writing themes is an initial step in expanding school and teacher understanding of violent texts potentially indicating the need for greater interventions.

Violent Writing Typology

In 1996 the World Health Assembly asked The World Health Organization to create a typology of violence that categorized and revealed links between proposed categories. The result of this inquiry was a violence typology that included three broad categories (self-directed, interpersonal, and collective violence) with included subcategories. Dividing factors included the intended target of the violence (toward self or others), and the source of the violence (an individual, a group, or large organized groups). Additionally, the typology considered the form of the violent act, including physical, sexual, psychological, or deprivation acts of harm.

To properly investigate how current secondary teachers respond to episodes of violent writing requires a comprehensive typology that encompasses the varieties of violent texts that may emerge. A new typology must similarly consider the potential intended target of violence so as to assist the determination of risk presented by the text and writer. The current study utilized a typology of violent writing consisting of seven categories drawn from previously evidenced themes of in-school and out-of-school violent texts associated with adolescent and adult writings, along with categorical warning signs highlighted by Mohandie's (2000/2002) work on school violence prevention and management. A qualitative coding process focused on thematic similarities culled from a variety of sources drove the identification of categories. A brief recap of research showing evidence of each newly proposed category of violent writing follows.

- **Shock Effect & Gory Writing** – This category is evidenced by Fletcher's (2006) research on boy writers showing that boys, more than girls, write of aggressive and violent themes, including descriptions of accidents, fantasy worlds, monsters, and

horror stories. Fletcher additionally encourages teachers to allow boys to utilize the genre of horror in their writing processes. Web-based resources exist (Wrentham Public Schools. (n.d.) to provide teachers with ideas for encouraging Halloween focused creative writing activities, and Hudson's (2003) research highlighting a jailed student for a Halloween essay shows that Halloween and gory writing is a normal part of academic writing. Additionally, Roy (2009) references the sadistic and depraved images presented in post-secondary student writings, although she is quick to assert that these images typically stem from intelligent students with no desire for actual violence.

- **Victim Violence** – This category stems from multiple fields of research, including the World Health Organization's (Krug et al., 2002) identification of interpersonal violence; violence that includes the subset of family and intimate partner violence. Interpersonal family violence often takes place in the home between family members, so this might include the victimizing acts of abuse or sexual assault. Educational research provides further proof of victimized persons, as Berman's classroom research (2001) provides post-secondary evidence of personal/autobiographical student writing containing descriptions of prior life violence, including episodes of abuse or fights. Additionally, forensic research reveals personal journal writings and Internet postings from prior school shooters; writings/postings that described incidents of being bullied and expressions of anger toward the victimization (Fast, 2008; Lieberman, 2008; Mohandie, 2000/2002).
- **Self-inflicted Violence** – The World Health Organization (Krug et al., 2002) identifies self-directed violence as either suicidal or self-abuse behaviors, including

mutilation. Berman's (2001) attention to risky writing found his college students willing to write of self-inflicted mutilation or harm, and the field of threat and risk assessment identifies leaked student ideations of suicide, including written descriptions, as a potential warning sign of violence (O'Toole, 2000). Mohandie (2000/2002) explains that any expression of hopelessness or wish to die, as evidenced among prior school shooters, should deepen one's concern to the point of making appropriate notifications, regardless of the modality (verbal or written expressions) of expression. Mohandie further reports that Columbine shooters Harris and Klebold allegedly posted online attack details, along with Harris's statements about death. This information is supported by an article written by the Denver Post in which Harris's online text indicated a desire to die (Briggs & Blevins, 1999).

- **Obsession Violence** – The FBI (O'Toole, 2000) explains that unusual interest in sensationalized violence or fascination with media sources containing extreme themes of violence are potential threatening signs. Similarly, Mohandie (2000/2002) explains that obsessions, "the repetitive or persistent preoccupation with a particular idea" (p. 42), are one of four key warning signs that an individual may hold the potential for risk. Obsessions may include attractions to violent music and other media. Research into the histories of prior school shooters finds that most were obsessed with violent themes, including violent music lyrics, video games, movies, and German themes, including Hitler or the Nazi period (Fast, 2008; Lieberman, 2008; Mohandie, 2000/2002). Prior to the shootings, some perpetrators had filled home journals or completed school research/essay assignments focused on repetitive violent themes, including Eric Harris's infatuation with all things German, like techno music filled

with assaulting thoughts (Mohandie, 2000/2002). Kip Kinkle's counselor informed his parents of his obsessive interest in bombs, including an essay about how to make a bomb that he read aloud for his English class (Fast, 2008; Langman, 2009), an action that led the mother to simply request a different counselor for her son (Langman, 2009).

- **Fantasy Writing containing indirect threats** – Fletcher (2006) highlights fantasy writing as a genre for boy writers, while forensic and psychological experts (Langman, 2009; Mohandie, 2000/2002) explain that fantasy expressions of violent behaviors are common to those who perpetrate real violence. For example, school shooter Barry Loukaitis's violent fantasies were evidenced months before the attack (Mohandie, 2000/2002). Such fantasy expressions provide a forum for actualizing real violence. Additionally, FBI research (O'Toole, 2000) shows that any type of threat, either verbal or written, can be classified into one of four categories (direct, indirect, veiled, or conditional). They describe indirect threats as "vague, unclear, and ambiguous," (O'Toole, 2000, p. 7), but nonetheless important enough to merit investigation showing how much thought has gone into the expressed threat.
- **Direct Threat Violence** – Direct threat violence involves a written expression of an exact plan to commit a violent act. FBI research (O'Toole 2000) describes verbal or written direct threats as specific. They are threats that identify "...a specific act against a specific target" (p. 7). Direct threat expressions indicate that harm is imminent and that action must be taken. They constitute the FBI's highest level of threat. Columbine shooters Harris and Klebold provided journal writings and Internet postings of their intent to commit violence (Fast, 2008).

- **Mixed Violence** – Some writing samples do not fall easily into one category. They may contain strains of proof from multiple categories, including a description of prior self-inflicted violence along with plans to harm those around them. The mixed violence category assumes that it may prove difficult to identify a writing sample as specific to one set of categorical descriptors, a notion shared by FBI (O'Toole, 2000) research explaining that distinguishing levels of threats may prove challenging, with threats overlapping multiple categories.

Conclusion

The combined research findings highlighting the subjective nature of teacher and school assessment and response decisions, along with the forensic world's charge to take careful notice of any student expression indicating a potential for violence, highlight a clear need to further investigate and understand teacher responses to violent writing. The current study is designed to address the lack of research around classroom-based violent writing representing a continuum of violent themes. The frequency of violent writing in the North Carolina 9th-12th grade English classroom, teacher response to such writing, and teacher perception of preparedness to respond to this writing will be investigated through the use of a new survey instrument containing closed- and open-ended questions for individual teacher response. The guiding research questions include:

Research Questions

1. How frequently do high school English teachers encounter violent writing among the 9th-12th grade students enrolled in English class?
2. What are the typical responses of high school English teachers who encounter violent writing?
3. Do high school English teachers feel prepared to respond to violent writing?

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODS

Research Questions

This non-experimental quantitative research design utilizing survey methodology was created to explore the phenomenon of violent writing in North Carolina public high school English classrooms. Specifically, the survey instrument was designed to collect data necessary for answering questions about frequency of incidents of violent writing, teacher response, and teacher perception of preparedness to respond to such incidents. The guiding research questions were:

1. How frequently do high school English teachers encounter violent writing among the 9th-12th grade students enrolled in English class?
2. What are the typical responses of high school English teachers who encounter violent writing?
3. Do high school English teachers feel prepared to respond to violent writing?

Research Design

Creswell (2005) explains that, “survey research is a popular design in education” (p.354). The popularity of the design rests in its ability to describe trends, behaviors, attitudes, or opinions about a target population; a characteristic that sets it apart from truly experimental research designed to manipulate variables or conditions to explain cause and effect (Creswell, 2005). Because the current study was concerned with understanding a phenomenon particular to a select group of high school teachers, including the specific behaviors of respondents when confronted with violent writing texts, a cross-sectional survey design utilizing a newly created instrument was the most appropriate design for collecting participant data.

The instrument consisted of closed and open-response survey questions designed to

provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, although the creation of the instrument did not evolve without its challenges. Creswell (2005) explains that while questionnaires serve as a frequently utilized tool for the collection of educational data, the creation of the instrument may prove to be a frustrating and complex process. In order to ensure a thorough research process prepared to address the complex research design and associated ethical considerations, the following concerns were carefully addressed: proper sampling procedures, instrument design, and ensuring an appropriate participant response rate.

Population and Sampling

The population for this research study was 2010-2011 North Carolina 9th-12th grade English teachers working in non-alternative, public high schools within the state's 115 Local Educational Agencies and identified by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction as English teachers, excluding English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. Private, charter, and alternative school staff, including early, middle college, or career education center high school staff, were excluded from the population. Population data were obtained from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, as the requested data were public domain and available through state data analysts. The initial identified population consisted of 4,335 teachers, although the number decreased after the pilot study district was identified and an additional school system chose non-participation. These exclusions reduced the final identified population to approximately 4,290 teachers. The decision to exclude ESL, alternative school, private, and charter school English teachers was driven by the fact that each works with a highly unique and sometimes atypical student population that is often smaller than the average North Carolina public high school population, meaning they provide a unique environment for teaching and learning that could result in different data outcomes.

North Carolina's 115 school superintendents were notified of the research study in July 2010. An email including an attached formal letter detailing the purpose of the study and requesting permission to send surveys to high school English teachers was sent (Appendix C). The letter explained that Superintendents provided district consent unless written notification of non-consent was provided within a two-week period following the email. The email was sent by the head of the North Carolina Association of School Superintendents, an organization to which all NC superintendents belong.

The decision to attach a formal letter explaining the research process, along with an electronic copy of the instrument, was driven by Creswell's (2005) recommendation that formal letters constitute the best way to obtain permission from necessary parties. Only one school system superintendent denied access to district English teachers. Teachers from the exempted district, along with those in the pilot survey district, were removed from the state database of teachers prior to selecting the final sample.

A sampling frame of 351 teachers was created from the population. The sample size was determined utilizing Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) recommended table of sample sizes, as based on size of populations. For a population of 4,000 or 4,500 teachers, a sample of 351 teachers was recommended. Using the random numbers generator in statistical software program SPSS, a simple random sampling procedure was utilized to select the sample. Creswell (2005) defines simple random sampling as "The most popular and rigorous form of probability sampling from a population," (p.147). Simple random sampling procedures ensured that each English teacher in the state database had an equal probability of being selected for the sample. Once contact information for sample participants were obtained, the pilot study began.

Instrumentation

Research data were obtained from sample participants through the use of an online questionnaire created with *Qualtrics*. The piloted survey of 41 questions was longer than the final survey of 36 questions, as it was determined that the length negatively impacted the participant response rate and thoroughness of responses. The final survey utilized multiple choice, Likert Scale, and open-response questions designed to address questions of frequency, response, and preparedness to respond to episodes of violent writing. Additionally, the introductory section of the questionnaire contained demographic questions, a feature common to research questionnaires (Creswell, 2005).

Survey Contents

The questionnaire consisted of three primary sections designed to address the previously stated research questions, although the majority of necessary data were derived from section two. Section one consisted of nine multiple choice demographic questions designed to obtain data about the teacher and his/her school and district. Key questions focused on types of English courses currently and typically taught, type and size of district (rural vs. urban), teacher grade level licensure, etc. These data were necessary for examining potential patterns of survey response, including comparisons of rural vs. urban teacher responses.

Section two of the instrument consisted of seven sub-sections corresponding to the seven identified categories of violent writing. Each sub-section contained three primary questions focused on an identified violent writing category, meaning respondents answered questions about frequency, response, and preparedness to respond for seven distinct categories. Table 3.1 provides a sample of the sub-section questions, using the category of shock effect and gory writing. The complete instrument is also available in Appendix B.

Table 3.1

Sample Instrument Questions for Section Two

Shock Effect & Gory Violent Writing Sub-Section

First Question: In a typical school year approximately how many examples of shock effect and gory violent student writing do you personally encounter in the English classroom? (A series of six responses were provided)

Second Question: If you were to encounter shock effect and gory violent writing, what might be your primary / first response? OR When you previously encountered shock effect and gory violent writing, what was your primary / first response? (A series of 7 or 8 answer choices was provided)

Third Question: How prepared do you feel you are to deal with/respond to shock effect and gory violent writing? (A series of four responses utilizing a Likert scale was provided)

It should be noted that an online filtering system determined the second question provided to the participant. If the participant selected zero examples for question one (meaning they do not encounter violent texts in a typical school year), they were asked the question “If you were to encounter...” If they selected one or more examples encountered for question one, they received the question, “How did you respond when...” The filtered question of response was followed by the final question on preparedness. The combination of filtered responses for each of the seven categories of violent writing provided important data to answer the guiding research questions.

The second section of the survey ended with three open-response questions designed to expand the data yielded by closed-response questions. This series of questions allowed participants to share specific and expanded details about prior encounters with violent texts, including the types of students who generally submit such texts, the courses in which it is most evidenced, and prior responses. Participants were also instructed to explain why they

selected in the prior section “not prepared” or “minimally prepared” to respond to any category of violent writing. Although the online survey format provided no limit to how much teachers could write, respondents were asked to keep answers brief so as to prevent intrusion on their school time.

The purpose of the open-response questions was threefold: (a) To provide teachers an opportunity to share openly about the identified phenomenon; (b) To provide a qualitative data source that would serve to expand quantitatively obtained data; and (c) To provide data yielding insight to future expansions of the current research, including potential research topics focused on the types of students or school courses yielding the most violent texts.

The third and final survey section focused on policy and training, with yes/no or open-response questions designed to expand teacher responses to prior questions of preparedness. Participants provided data about prior involvement in professional development related to response to violent writing, including requested information about the type and length of training. Participants additionally answered questions about their school’s or district’s utilization of a policy addressing teacher response to violent writing, and whether or not they agreed that schools or districts should have such policies. Beyond “yes/no” responses, policy questions allowed participants to select “I don’t know.” The inclusion of this answer choice was purposeful, as the researcher’s own experience as a classroom high school teacher represented a period in which the researcher was unaware if violent writing was addressed in the school’s safe schools policy. The policy and training data from section three provided a clearer understanding of respondent preparedness, or lack of preparedness, to respond to violent writing.

Survey Development Process

The identification of no known survey addressing the construct of interest resulted in

a new researcher-created instrument. Although new and not based on any previously created instrument, the type of questions evidenced on the instrument are remotely similar to components of surveys focused on school violence and staff perception of violence, including the *National School Violence Survey*. The *National School Violence Survey*, or modified versions of it, according to Chambers (2009), has been used to measure school staff perceptions of school violence, including studies with school social workers (Astor et al., 1997) psychologists (Furlong, Babinski, Poland, Munoz, and Boles, 1996) and counselors (Chambers, 2009).

Across the aforementioned studies, survey questions yielded respondent data on some of the following categories: frequency of encounters with violent behaviors, personal perceptions of school/campus safety, and prior specialized training for dealing with reported violent events. Additionally, the *School Survey on Crime and Safety*, (United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.) which is a cross-sectional national survey designed to collect school-level data, includes questions about frequency of incidents, frequency of reports to law enforcement (questions evoking data of response), and questions about staff training on school/campus violence. In similar fashion, the instrument created for the current study engaged respondents in questions about frequency of incidents, responses, and training, along with added questions about perceived preparedness to respond, although the new instrument is not an adaptation of a prior survey.

Reliability and Validity Evidence

Critical to the success of the completed research study was the establishment of instrument reliability and validity. This process occurred through a three-step process involving: (a) Establishment of content validity through an expert panel analysis (b) Pilot Testing of Instrument; and (c) Final Instrument Revisions.

Content Validity. Upon completion of an initial instrument draft, a panel of content experts from various geographical locations was asked to review the instrument to provide content and construct validation. Haynes, Richard, Kubany (1995) define content validity as “...the degree to which elements of an assessment instrument are relevant to and representative of the targeted construct for a particular assessment process” (p. 328). Inherent in this definition is attention to relevancy and representativeness of instrument items to cover the construct of focus. Hayes, Richard, and Kubany (1995) further explain that attention to specificity and clarity of instrument items is part of the content validation process. The identified expert panelists provided that level of added attention to these four aspects of content validity.

Panelists were asked closed- and open-response questions focused on the representativeness, relevancy, specificity, and clarity of all items, including the provided definition and categorization of violent writing. The panelists consisted of three current or former high school English teachers and/or higher education English professors, one forensic psychologist with expertise in school violence management and threat assessment, and a former high school counselor with extensive training and expertise in threat and risk assessments, including youth violent writings within a public school setting. Additionally, some of the panelists were accomplished authors, with articles or books addressing either educational teacher concerns with disturbing writing (Valentino, 1995) or school violence management (Mohandie, 2000/2002).

Panelists were provided a copy of the instrument (Appendix B) and associated response form with an initial request to provide feedback on the researcher’s definition for violent writing; an issue of construct definition. Murphy and Davishofer (1994) highlight the

challenges of providing content validation for a construct with a fuzzy or inconsistent definition. Because this research study and the associated instrument utilized a new construct definition, expert panelist feedback on the proposed definition for and categorization of violent writing was a critical validation step. As requested, all panelists completed the content validation process and instrument response form, with two follow-up questions sent to selected panelists to clarify feedback.

Although the panelists were generally pleased with the newly created instrument, feedback led to minimal instrument revisions, including minor question or answer choice revisions; primarily for the purpose of ensuring participant clarity. In addition to recommended wording revisions, expert panelist feedback yielded the following significant changes to the instrument:

- Two new questions about policy and training were added
- Expansion or revision to answer choices to cover all potential teacher responses (example: addition of a grades 4-9 English Language Arts certification category in the demographic licensure question)
- Recommendation to expand the definition of violent writing to consider psychological violence
- Addition of one additional category of violent writing – mixed violence
- Recommendation to filter questions, as based on prior question response

Pilot Study. Upon completion of the expert panel phase, the questionnaire (Appendix B) was piloted with a targeted group of 58 9th-12th grade English teachers serving in a public, rural North Carolina school system exhibiting some urban district characteristics. Access to high school English teachers was provided by district administration. All district 9th-12th grade English teachers, with the exception of those serving in alternative high school learning environments, were included in the pilot.

As per Creswell's (2005) recommended practices for quantitative research procedures, participant privacy and confidentiality was protected through obtaining all proper permissions to conduct the study. Institutional Review Board permission, coupled with pilot participant pre-notification (Appendix D) and notification letters (Appendix E) completed critical steps in the process. All participants were notified that their active participation in and completion of the survey was the avenue by which they provided informed consent, and that they had the right to opt out of the study if they chose.

Teachers were given a four-week window within which to complete the online questionnaire and a series of five feedback questions asking about length of time to complete the instrument, clarity of questions, etc. (Appendix F). With the exception of the feedback form, similar pre-notification (Appendix D) and notification letters (Appendix G) for sample participants were utilized. Thank you letters (Appendix H) and reminders (Appendix I & J) were also sent at appropriate intervals, for both pilot and sample participants.

Although pilot participants lacked the full diversity of the sample, demographic data were similar. Among the 58 teachers invited to participate in the study, 28 provided some type of response to at least one survey question, resulting in an overall response rate of 48%. Individual sections, though, resulted in lower response rates, as some participants left questions blank. A brief summation of pilot participant results follows.

Demographic data revealed that 100% of pilot study participants were Caucasian, with 25% male and 75% female. The average number of years of educational experience varied across the provided categories, with the smallest percentage of respondents (2 respondents, or 7%) indicating between 1-3 years of educational work. Exactly 50% of participants indicated that they had between 4 and 15 years of educational experience,

meaning half of those surveyed could be identified as experienced teachers. The majority of participants carried 9th-12th grade English Language Arts licensure, with English I marked as the most frequently taught course. Few respondents were currently teaching English department elective courses, and 100% of participants taught on a block system.

The remaining piloted survey questions dealt with the three identified areas of interest: frequency, response, and perception of preparedness to respond. Final pilot study data predicted the responses and trends evidenced in the sample survey. Table 3.2 provides a brief summation of pilot study results across the three areas of interest.

Table 3.2

Pilot Study Participant Responses

Pilot Study Participant Responses
<p>Frequency – Data revealed that participants encounter few incidents of any category of violent writing in a typical school year, with between 96% and 100% respondents in any given category indicating that they experience fewer than 20 encounters annually. A minimal number of 5 participants indicated experiencing more than 20 annual examples of violent writing, with 3 encounters in the shock effect/gory violent writing category, 1 in victim violence, and 1 in direct threat writing. The pilot data indicated that the majority of respondents have minimal experience with violent writing, and only 1 out of 28 experienced higher annual rates of direct threat writing.</p> <p>Response – The piloted survey asked participants to indicate their primary and secondary response to each of the 7 categories of violent writing. Data showed that many respondents did not answer all of the questions in this series of 14 questions, with most failing to respond to the question of secondary response. Primary response data found very few participants indicating contact with parents or other teachers. Instead, the greatest majority of respondents indicated that they typically do not see categories of violent writing and thus have no primary response (from 43.5% in direct threat violence writing to 12.5% in victim violence writing). Additionally, a significant number of respondents indicated a primary response of communicating with the student (from 29.12% for victim violence to 13% for direct threat violence) or with a counselor/mental health provider (from 37.5% for self-inflicted to 0% for primary responses to shock effect/gory violence writing). Additionally, some participants indicated they grade work normally, regardless of violent content (as many as 54% of participants selected this answer choice for shock effect/gory writing, and up to 42% in obsession violence writing). Although few participants indicated a secondary response, common secondary responses included talking to the student, to the guidance counselor or other mental health provider, or talking to an administrator (for direct threat or mixed violence writing). For direct threat writing, a significant percentage of respondents (22%) indicated that they address the matter with a school administrator.</p> <p>Preparedness to Respond - Preparedness data found respondents indicating that they are “fairly well prepared” to respond to episodes of violent writing across the 7 categories (between 35% and 57% of participants in any given category), although in the categories of obsession, mixed, and direct threat violence writing, up to 48%, 35%, and 31% of respondents respectively indicated feeling not or minimally prepared to respond.</p>

In summation, the pilot study found participants indicating that in a typical school year they face a minimal number of encounters with violent writing, evidence varied

responses to encountered texts, although the most frequently selected responses outside of no response involved talking with the student or a counselor/mental health provider, and a minimum of approximately half of respondents in any given category feel fairly well prepared to address violent writing. Certain categories, though, evoked higher levels of participant unpreparedness, including obsession, mixed, and direct threat violence writing. As detailed in chapter four, sample data revealed similar trends.

Instrument Revisions and Reliability. Pilot study data and participant feedback on the five open-response questions at the end of the survey led to phase three of the instrument process – determination of instrument reliability and final edits. In cases where participants indicated confusing wording, answer choices, or frustrations with the survey length, questions were revised for clarity or removed to shorten the instrument. These revisions included adoption of a more user-friendly online format.

Data were used to determine instrument reliability through statistical calculations of a reliability coefficient. Cronbach's alpha revealed moderate to relatively high coefficients for the three survey constructs of frequency, response and perception of preparedness ($\alpha = .71 - .94$). Reliability coefficients determined that the survey items represented the constructs and made the instrument reliable (see Table 3.3):

Table 3.3

Reliability Coefficients from Pilot Test

	Frequency	Response	Perception of Preparedness to Respond
Pilot Survey Alpha Coefficients	.709	.932	.940

Despite respectable reliability coefficients for the instrument, feedback and survey data made it clear that final minor revisions were necessary. The length of the survey, combined with participant non-responses to many of the questions emphasized the need to shorten the instrument, particularly in regard to questions about typical participant responses to categories of violent writing. The initial piloted survey contained a series of 14 questions that asked each participant to indicate their primary and secondary response to each category. Participant non-response on the secondary response question revealed that it was both an unnecessary and unfair question.

Subsequently, the instrument questions on response were revised to allow participants to indicate either prior responses to encountered violent texts, or their assumed typical response if they *were to encounter* violent texts. A filtering system determined which question to present to the participant, as based on previously provided frequency input. This filtering process removed the question about secondary response to violent writing, as well as the answer choice, “I have no typical response.” These changes reduced by five the total number of survey questions respondents needed to answer.

Additional instrument concerns regarding participant non-response or inaccurate response was evidenced by the demographic question regarding school system designation as rural or urban. All pilot participants taught in an officially designated “rural” school system, yet many indicated that their schools were urban. Responses pointed to a lack of teacher knowledge about NC school district designations and required a question revision asking respondents to indicate their school’s rural or urban status, as based on personal opinion.

Because some pilot participants complained about the difficulty of scrolling between the primary chart providing definitions and examples of violent writing categories and

questions on frequency/response, etc. it was determined to remove the chart and re-group questions. The finale sample survey therefore contained one sub-section for each of the 7 categories, with categorical definitions and examples provided at the head of the section. This change removed the need for participants to continuously scroll or click back to a primary chart of violent writing categories. Final instrumentation changes additionally included a reduction in open-response questions so as to remove unnecessary questions that lengthened the time required to provide responses. A reduction in questions and an easier visual format reduced the average time required to complete the survey from 20-25 minutes to 15-18 minutes. Upon completion of all minor revisions, the statewide survey was commenced.

Data Collection Procedures

Participant confidentiality and protection guided the research process. Upon obtaining permission from the Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board in May 2009 to conduct the proposed research project, the instrument was implemented and data collected utilizing prior notification and reminder notices, and a technologically based confidential survey and data reporting system. Pilot and sample survey participants were notified either via a hard copy or electronic format of their selection to participate in the study. The survey followed three days later, via email, with reminder emails sent at regular intervals (Appendix I & J). “Thank You” emails (Appendix H) were sent at one-week intervals.

The online survey creation program *Qualtrics* provided a technologically-based confidential data collection site and process for respondents. A participant coding system ensured that participant identification was known only to researcher. Additionally, open-response questions instructed respondents to refrain from providing identifying information,

including school, student, or geographic names. The sensitive nature of the research topic emphasized the need to handle participants with care, as sharing incidents of violent writing held the potential of upsetting respondents forced to recall painful or challenging classroom or school experiences.

Consultation with an experienced North Carolina school board attorney resulted in an additional request for participants to refrain from reporting specific incidents of violent writing describing abusive situations, as such reporting might place the teacher, his/her district, and the researcher in a complicated legal situation requiring reports to state law enforcement officials about potentially unreported prior episodes of student abuse.

The combination of a confidential survey and data reporting process, requests to avoid divulging personal identifying or abuse data, and informed consent explanations served to ensure respondent protection and ethical research practices.

Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher used a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, combined with a textual coding process (Patton, 2002) to analyze quantitative and qualitative data gleaned from the participant survey. *Qualtrics* and *SPSS* were the researcher's programs of choice for establishing the web-based survey and generating necessary statistical tests. Data for participant and school demographics, along with each of the three guiding research questions, were reported with frequency tables showing the number and percentage of respondents selecting each answer choice, along with accompanying Pearson chi square analyses when appropriate. Specific analyses conducted with data from each section of the survey instrument are described.

Demographic Data

Participant demographic data were presented with frequency tables showing total

number and percentage of respondents selecting each answer choice (number of males vs. females, rural vs. urban teachers, non-experienced vs. experienced teachers, etc.). Questions about the types of classes taught, size of school, etc. were necessary for creating a descriptive picture of participant characteristics and to consider disaggregated data trends.

Research Question One: Frequency

Question: How frequently do high school English teachers encounter violent writing among the 9th-12th grade students enrolled in English class?

Data on frequency of encounters with incidents of violent writing were reported using frequency tables and percentages for all 7 violent writing categories. Additionally, Pearson chi square analyses examining the relationships between years of educational experience, type of school (rural vs. urban), and frequency of encounters were conducted for each category of violent writing. Quantitative data were then combined with textual data obtained from an open-response survey question about the type and frequency of violent writing evidenced in a typical school year.

Research Question Two: Response

Question: What are the typical responses of high school English teachers who encounter violent writing?

Data analysis procedures for the question of response involved the reporting of respondent percentages showing how they previously responded or would respond if categories had been/were to be encountered. Data from each of the two sub-categories of participants (those who had encountered and those who had not encountered violent writing) were first analyzed separately, and then merged to consider the summed responses. The researcher believed that summed responses provided an accurate picture of total teacher response, and therefore the summed responses were utilized to complete Pearson chi square

analyses examining potential associations between teacher response and years of educational experience across each of the seven categories of violent writing. Additionally, data from the open-response survey questions were used to expand the picture of teacher response to violent texts.

Research Question Three: Perception of Preparedness

Question: Do high school English teachers feel prepared to respond to violent writing?

As with research questions one and two, the percentages of respondents selecting each category of “level of preparedness” for all violent writing categories were reported. Additionally, the Likert scale format of the preparedness questions yielded to a descriptive statistical reporting of mean and standard deviation results for preparedness results among all categories of writing. Further data analysis involved the completion of a Pearson chi square test utilizing the variables of frequency of encounters and perception of preparedness. This analysis provided insight into the question of how the number of annual encounters may translate into perceived levels of teacher reported preparedness to respond.

Policy and Training

The last series of survey questions asked respondents to indicate involvement in prior trainings around response to the phenomenon of interest, along with their knowledge of or agreement with the notion that schools/districts need policies governing teacher responses to violent texts. Participants were provided with yes/no answer choices or Likert scale responses reported with frequency tables.

Summary

The purpose of the preceding text was to outline the research methods selected for this study, including sampling and data collection procedures, along with details about the

instrumentation process (instrument creation, validation, and utilization). As described, this study adopted a non-experimental research design yielding both quantitative and qualitative data outputs designed to answer three research questions about the phenomenon of violent writing in North Carolina high school English classrooms. Sample participants included 9th-12th grade English teachers representing a variety of North Carolina school districts and school settings, including participants from all three geographic regions of the state (Mountains, Piedmont, and Coastal Plains). The following chapters provide in-depth data analyses and discussion of the implications of these findings.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Respondent Demographics

The study was conducted with a random sample of North Carolina high school English teachers representing varied public school districts. The districts represented North Carolina's three geographic areas: Mountains, Piedmont, and Coastal Plain. A database of 9th-12th grade English teachers, their assigned schools, and courses was provided by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, as the data were considered public domain data. From the provided database, the statistical program *SPSS* was utilized to create a random sample of 351 teachers. A total of 92 participants accessed the survey, and 87 of the 92 answered any survey questions, resulting in a response rate of 24.6%. As evidenced in Table 4.1, the majority of respondents were Caucasian (89.7%), with few minority groups represented.

Table 4.1

Participant Demographics

Characteristic	Number	Percentage of the Sample
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	78	89.7%
African-American	8	9.2%
Hispanic	1	1.1%
Gender		
Females	75	86.2%
Males	12	13.8%
Total Years of Educational Experiences		
Between 1-3 years	7	8.1%
Between 4-10 years	33	38.4%
Between 11-15 years	16	18.6%
Between 16-19 years	11	12.8%
20 years of more	19	22%
Teacher Licensure		
4 th -9 th grade ELA	1	1.2%
6 th -12 th grade ELA	24	27.9%
9 th -12 th grade ELA	56	65.1%
K-8 th grade ELA	0	0%
K-12 th grade ELA	3	3.5%
Not licensed in ELA	2	2.3%

NOTE. K= Kindergarten and ELA = English Language Arts. For total years of educational experience and teacher licensure, only 86 of the 87 respondents answered the question.

As with the pilot study, the majority of participants were female (75 or 86.2%), with total number of years of educational experience spread across the categories, from 1 to more than 20 years of experience evidenced. As illustrated in Table 4.1, the greatest percentage of respondents (38%, or 33 teachers) presented between 4 and 10 years of experience.

In response to questions of licensure, the majority of respondents (66%) indicated 9th-12th grade English licensure, with 6th-12th grade licensure the second most frequently selected category (28%).

The majority of respondents teach English I, II, III, or IV (9th grade, 10th grade, 11th grade, and 12th grade North Carolina mandatory English courses, respectively) in a typical school year, with only a small number indicating the teaching of elective English courses, including journalism, creative writing, remediation English, and Advanced Placement English courses (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2

Assigned English Courses in a Typical School Year

Course Title	Number of Respondents	Percentage
English I	40	46%
English II	43	49.4%
English III	46	52.9%
English IV	38	43.7%
Advanced Placement English	28	32.2%
Remediation English	18	20.7%
Journalism	7	8%
Creative Writing or other Electives	16	18.4%

School Demographics

Additional survey questions focused on school schedules, types of schools, and the

number of students annually taught. Participants were given multiple choice questions designed to yield necessary data, with questions focused on either typical or current school year information. Data related to overall school and participant classroom demographics are detailed below.

School Schedules

Data regarding school schedules found that the majority of the sample work in high schools with traditional block scheduling, a schedule whereby students typically complete 8 courses per year, 4 per semester, and teachers provide instruction for six courses annually. Respondents indicated that 4.6% teach on a modified block schedule, 10.3% on a traditional year-long schedule, and 85% on a block schedule.

Type of School

More respondents work in rural North Carolina schools than urban, although a respectable number indicated urban school settings. 59.8% of teachers teach in rural schools and 40.2% are urban. The question designed to elicit this data point asked teachers to identify their school's category, as based on what they knew to be true, rather than using state district designations. The reason for asking teachers to self-identify their school's proper category evolved out of pilot study data in which participants from a state identified rural school system frequently indicated that they were urban.

Number of Students Taught

For the 2010-2011 school year, 83%, or 72 teachers marked that they taught between 101-200 students. Twelve respondents (14%) taught between 51-100, and only a few taught less than 50 students (1 teacher) or more than 200 (2 teachers). These data support the finding that the majority of participants teach on a block or modified block schedule, a

schedule which typically results in teachers preparing between 4-6 courses annually, with an average course holding between 20-35 students.

Research Questions

Beyond participant demographic data, the survey instrument was designed to collect data needed to answer three research questions: questions regarding frequency of encounters with violent writing, teacher response to violent writing, and teacher perception of preparedness to respond to violent writing. Research questions were:

1. How frequently do high school English teachers encounter violent writing among the 9th-12th grade students enrolled in English class?
2. What are the typical responses of high school English teachers who encounter violent writing?
3. Do high school English teachers feel prepared to respond to violent writing?

Additional questions related to training and policy were added in hopes of providing a deeper understanding of teacher responses to questions about their perceived levels of preparedness to respond to violent texts. The instrument worked as designed and provided necessary data.

Question One: Frequency Data

For each of the seven identified categories of violent writing, respondents were asked to indicate the number of examples encountered in a *typical* school year. Answer choices were provided in categorical form (0 examples, 1-5, 6-10, 11-20, 21-30, or more than 30 examples). A definition and brief summation of examples for each category of violent writing was provided prior to the answer choice options. Data showed that respondents encounter violent writing in a typical school year, although encounters are few in number. As illustrated in Table 4.3, disaggregated data showing the number of respondents within each frequency category reveals that the majority of participants see zero or less than 5 examples

of any given category in a typical school year.

Table 4.3

Frequency Categories and Summed Totals

Number of examples encountered in a typical year	Sum of Respondents from all 7 categories
Zero Examples	335
1-5 Examples	232
6-10 Examples	23
11-20 Examples	6
21-30 Examples	3
More than 30	4
Total Number of Responses	603

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there were only 7 indicators of 21 or more examples of violent writing in a typical school year, meaning a high frequency of annual examples across the seven categories is rare. At least 50% of marked responses indicated zero encounters. The raw data summations confirm that categories of violent writing are evidenced in NC secondary English classrooms, but at low rates (typically less than 5 examples annually). To consider that a typical North Carolina school year is 180 days, only 5 examples of any given category across a 180-day span means that a teacher, on average, encounters violent texts on 2.7% of given school days.

Open-response question data further support the discovery that violent writing is rarely evidenced. Participant responses to a survey question about the type and amount of

violent texts encountered in a typical year led to the following data conclusions:

- Violent writing is rarely seen in a typical school year
- Violent writing is primarily evidenced in autobiographical or journal writing assignments in which students address personal themes, reader-response journals to assigned literature, or through creative writing assignments
- Teachers indicated that the reason they often do not see it is because they do not issue assignments that would elicit any type of violent writing, or because they forbid students to write about themes involving guns, blood, etc.
- Common themes in previously evidenced violent texts included prior incidents of physical or sexual abuse, bullying, or gang-related activities

Many participants used the language, “I rarely see,” or “I see very little violent writing.” One teacher remarked, “I rarely, thank goodness, encounter this type of student writing.”

Quantitative frequency data were additionally analyzed to examine categorical trends regarding which categories of violent texts are most or least evidenced in 9th-12th grade English classrooms. Table 4.4 below provides a breakdown of each category’s reported examples.

Table 4.4

Frequency Data by Category

Category	Number and Percentage of Respondents Encountering Examples in a Typical Year					
	0 Examples	1-5 Examples	6-10 Examples	11-20 Examples	21-30 Examples	More than 30 Exp.
Shock Effect & Gory Violence (n=87)	28 32%	45 51%	10 11%	3 3%	1 1%	0 0%
Victim Violence (n=86)	25 29%	54 63%	4 5%	1 1%	0 0%	2 2%
Self- Inflicted (n=86)	48 56%	36 42%	1 1%	0 0%	0 0%	1 1%
Obsession Violence (n=86)	40 47%	39 45%	4 5%	1 1%	1 1%	1 1%
Fantasy Violence Containing Indirect Threats (n=86)	60 70%	24 28%	2 2%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Direct Threat violence (n=86)	77 90%	9 10%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Mixed Violence (n=86)	57 66%	25 29%	2 2%	1 1%	1 1%	0 0%

The data show that all categories of violent writing are evidenced in a typical school year, although some are more frequently encountered than others. Table 4.5 provides a summation of the number of respondents indicating one or more encounters with each category of violent writing (participants indicating zero encounters were removed from this table). As shown, victim violence is the most evidenced (61 respondents indicated 1 or more encounters with this category), with shock effect and gory violence examples following closely behind (59 respondents indicating encountering 1 or more examples annually). The least evidenced category is direct threat violence writing, with only 9 participants indicating that they encounter between 1-5 examples annually.

Table 4.5

Summed Number of Respondents Encountering Violent Writing

Category	Number of Respondents encountering violent writing (Sum of responses > 0)
Shock Effect & Gory Violence Writing	59
Victim Violence Writing	61
Self-inflicted Violence Writing	38
Obsession Violence Writing	46
Fantasy Violence Containing Indirect Threats	26
Direct Threat Violence	9
Mixed Violence	29

Although the majority of categories evidenced the highest number of participants

indicating zero encounters in a typical school year, two of the seven violent writing categories (shock effect/gory and victim violence writing), reversed the trend and had more respondents reporting in the 1-5 annual examples category.

Upon completion of frequency reporting, chi square analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between the frequency of incidents and type of school, and between frequency of incidents and years of teacher educational experience. A lack of response distribution across three of the seven categories (victim, obsession, and mixed violence) prevented a chi square analysis from being completed. This outcome points to the notion that the number of encountered episodes with violent writing are quite restricted and limited. With an alpha rate of .05, chi square results showed that there were no statistically significant relationships between type of school and frequency of encounters with violent texts (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6

Chi Square Analyses: Frequency vs. Type of School

Category of Violent Writing	Frequency vs. Type of School
Shock Effect/Gory	χ^2 (4, N=86) = 6.75, p = .150
Self-Inflicted Violence	χ^2 (3, N= 86) = 3.47 p = .325
Fantasy Violence with indirect threats	χ^2 (2, N=86) = 2.61, p = .271
Direct Threat Violence	χ^2 (1, N=86) = .101, p =.750

Similar non-significant results were evidenced with the frequency and years of educational experience association analysis (see Table 4.7). Lack of response variability

across the categories negated the opportunity to complete a chi square analysis except for the category of direct threat writing. Direct threat writing was the only category in which five or fewer cells had an expected count less than five, thus enabling the completion of the statistical analysis. The analysis showed no statistically significant association between frequency and educational experience, yet provides insight into the phenomenon of direct threat writing. The finding that all participant frequency responses for this category were clustered around the two categories of “zero” or “1-5,” which is remarkably different from the other categories in which a minimal number of respondents saw more than five examples, emphasizes the rare occurrence of direct threat texts.

Table 4.7

Chi Square Analyses: Frequency vs. Years of Experience

Category of Violent Writing	Frequency vs. Participant Years of Experience
Direct Threat Violence	χ^2 (4, N=85) = 3.60, $p=.463$

Final data analyses for research question one involved an analysis of the categories of fantasy violent writing containing indirect threats and direct threat violence writing.

Although not indicated in correspondence with survey participants, the seven categories represented a continuum of severity or level of threat/risk, with indirect and direct threat writing potentially indicating higher levels of concern. In that spirit, data regarding number of annual encounters with each of these categories were considered.

90% of respondents, (77 individuals) indicated that they encounter no direct threat writing examples annually, while nine participants see between 1-5 annual examples. Open-

ended survey responses to a question about annual encounters with violent writing also found teachers describing almost no encounters with direct threat writing. While nine reported that encounters with direct threat writing is minimal, the level of threat/risk typically associated with direct threat violent writing (writing that specifically details a plan to bring about harm/violence) makes this finding significant, as explained in Chapter V.

More participants indicated encounters with fantasy violence containing indirect threats – a total of 26 responses indicating that between 1-5 or 6-10 examples of indirect threat writing are evidenced annually. The data set for both indirect and direct threat writing showed data to be positively skewed, a trend also evidenced in the other five categories of violent writing. The positive skewness of these categories represents the extreme nature of reported examples of violent texts within a typical school year.

According to the data, teachers in the state of North Carolina encounter violent writing in a typical school year, although some categories (shock effect/gory, obsession, and victim violence) are evidenced more frequently than others. Overall data show that the number of encounters for any given category typically remains low (typically zero or between 1-5 encounters for the average teacher), with occasional spikes for some participants. Skewness data show that the distribution of categorical responses for any of the 7 categories is atypical, with positive skewness reflecting the extreme responses (majority of responses fell within two ranges (zero or between 1-5 examples annually)).

Question 2: Response Data

Question: What are the typical responses of high school English teachers who encounter violent writing?

The instrument was designed to determine teacher response to violent writing. A filter was utilized with the online survey to determine which of two questions participants needed

to answer, as based on their answer to the “frequency” questions. Participants who encountered examples of violent writing in any given category were asked to indicate their primary response to previously encountered examples. Participants who marked zero encounters with any given category were asked to indicate their potential primary response if they *were* to encounter the category of writing. For both types of questions, respondents were allowed to choose from the following seven answer choices:

- I treated the violent content like any other work and graded it normally
- I ignored the violent content and only grade aspects of grammar and style
- I addressed the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on paper
- I called the parent/guardian and/or held a parent conference
- I contacted and/or discussed with another teacher
- I contacted and/or discussed incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- I contacted and/or discussed incident with school administrators

For those participants indicating how they might respond if samples were encountered, they were given the additional answer choice of “I don’t know what my typical response would be.”

Participants Who Had Encountered.

Among teachers who previously encountered violent writing, the most frequently selected category of response for five of the seven categories of violent writing was addressing the writing with the student, either through a verbal conversation or written response on the paper (see Table 4.8).

Table 4.8

Primary Responses: Teachers Who Encountered Violent Writing

Category	Percentage of Respondents Selecting each Response						
	Graded text normally	Ignored the violent content and only graded elements of grammar and style	Addressed with the student, either verbally or with a written response on student paper	Contacted or held a conference with the parent	Discussed with another teacher	Contacted or discussed with a counselor or other mental health provider	Contacted and/or discussed with a school administrator
Shock & Gory	28%	0%	56%	2%	4%	7%	4%
Victim	2%	0%	52%	0%	2%	39%	5%
Self-Inflicted	0%	3%	29%	0%	3%	58%	8%
Obsession Fantasy	33%	0%	41%	2%	2%	13%	9%
Violence w/indirect threats	12%	0%	46%	4%	4%	19%	15%
Direct Threat	0%	0%	22%	0%	0%	11%	67%
Mixed	7%	0%	45%	0%	3%	38%	7%

Two categories, self-inflicted and direct threat, were exceptions to the pattern. Participants indicated that self-inflicted writing primarily resulted in contacting a guidance counselor or other mental health provider (58%), while direct threat writing prompted 67% of

respondents to contact or discuss the incident with school administrators (Table 4.8).

Among four of the seven categories of violent writing, contacting a guidance counselor or other mental health provider was the second most frequently selected response, behind contact with the student. As evidenced in Table 4.8, each category evidenced a respectable percentage of respondents seeking mental health advice/help beyond their classroom (from 7%-58% for any given violent writing category). Quantitative data also revealed that “grading the work normally” was the second most selected response for obsession and shock effect/gory writing.

Answer choices predominantly unmarked included “ignoring the violent content and only grading elements of grammar and style” and “contacting the parents.” Only one respondent in one category (self-inflicted violent writing) marked that he/she would ignore the writing and only consider elements of grammar and style, and three writing categories found participants contacting parents, at a rate of 2-4% or fewer of respondents. Similarly, few teachers indicated a prior primary response of discussing with another teacher; fewer than 4% of respondents in any given category chose this category, meaning fewer than 6 total respondents previously chose this as their primary response.

Qualitative data gleaned from an open-response survey question asking teachers to detail a prior English classroom encounter with any type of violent writing, including their response to the writing, revealed trends similar to those identified through quantitative data. Among the 56 written responses provided, the most frequently detailed response was that of contacting the school counselor. Many also indicated that administrators were additionally involved in reviewing the concerning writing sample, and students were directly addressed by the teacher, counselor, or administrator. Teacher remarks included the following:

- “I felt the obligation to report it at once to our guidance counselor.”
- “I spoke with the boy...and then gave a copy of the paper to the administration.”
- “I turned in the poem to the student support counselor”
- “I spoke to the student and contacted administration.”
- “I contacted the administration and counselors...”
- “I took the paper to his guidance counselor who did talk to him.”
- “I chose to respond to that student in writing about the incident.”
- “It was disgusting. I sent it (the paper) to an administrator...”
- “Social Services and law enforcement were notified...”

The open-response data additionally revealed a teacher response pattern that is not evidenced in the closed-response questions; a pattern of multiple steps of response. The written explanations showed that many teachers chose to respond to violent texts through a multi-step process that often involved talking to the student, contacting the counselor, and if merited, further contact with school administrators or parents. One research participant even contacted the researcher after submitting her survey responses to indicate displeasure about being required to choose a primary response, as she wanted the option to select multiple responses.

Participants Who Had Not Encountered.

For respondents who were asked to indicate their primary response if they *were* to encounter violent writing, similar trends to the prior subgroup emerged. Zero percent of respondents indicated that they would ignore the violent content and just grade aspects of grammar or style, and no more than 4% of respondents in any violent writing category indicated they would contact or discuss the writing with parents, meaning fewer than 2-3

teachers in most cases (see Table 4.9). When compared to teachers who previously responded to violent writing, a higher percentage of respondents indicated they would discuss the writing with another teacher (percentages ranged from 0%-9% across the 7 categories of violent writing, as compared to a range of 0%-4% among the prior subgroup.

Table 4.9

Anticipated Primary Responses: Teachers Who Had Not Encountered

Category	Percentage of Respondents Selecting Each Response						
	Graded text normally	Ignored the violent content and only graded elements of grammar and style	Addressed with the student, either verbally or with a written response on student paper	Contacted or held a conference with the parent	Discussed with another teacher	Contacted or discussed with a counselor or other mental health provider	Contacted and/or discussed with a school administrator
Shock & Gory	7%	0%	50%	0%	0%	25%	14%
Victim	0%	0%	32%	4%	8%	32%	20%
Self-Inflicted	0%	0%	20%	4%	2%	59%	15%
Obsession	3%	0%	23%	3%	3%	54%	8%
Fantasy Violence w/indirect threats	0%	0%	13%	2%	5%	43%	35%
Direct Threat	0%	0%	3%	3%	3%	18%	74%
Mixed	0%	0%	26%	4%	9%	26%	33%

As with respondents who had previously encountered violent writing, respondents asked to project their primary response if encountering violent writing largely selected to address with a counselor or other mental health provider. In fact, only a minimal number of participants indicated that they would grade the work normally (only two categories evidenced between 3-7% of respondents selecting this response).

Conversing with the student, either verbally or through written text, was similarly an oft selected response for participants predicting their primary response. 50% of participants in the shock effect/gory category, marked that they would engage the student as their primary response. In two categories (victim and mixed violence writing), the percentage of participants selecting to address with student or address with a counselor was evenly split (32% for victim violence / 26% for mixed violence). Across the 7 categories of violent writing, conversing with the student remained among the top three responses, along with contacting a counselor or school administrator.

Respondents who were asked to project their primary responses to violent writing were given an additional response choice – “I don’t know what my primary/first response would be.” Table 4.10 provides data collected from this answer choice.

Table 4.10

Participant Responses: “I Don’t Know”

Category	Percentage of Respondents Selecting “I Don’t Know”
Shock & Gory	4%
Victim	4%
Self-Inflicted	0%
Obsession	8%
Fantasy Violence w/indirect threats	2%
Direct Threat	0%
Mixed	2%

Data show that while a small percentage of respondents selected “I don’t know what my primary/first response would be” given violent writing category (between 0-4% typically), 8% of respondents selected this option for the category of obsession violence. The data indicate that teachers who typically do not encounter obsession violence writing in a typical year potentially feel the greatest uncertainty in response.

Summed Responses From Both Sub-Groups.

When respondent data from *both* subcategories of response (those who had seen it and those who might see it) were summed, resulting in approximately 85 total responses for each given violent writing category, percentages showed that:

- The highest percentage of teachers chose to address the incident directly with the student across four of the 7 violent writing categories (Shock effect/gory, victim, obsession, and mixed violence, with percentages ranging from 32.9% to 54.1%)

- Direct threat violence writing was the only category evidencing the highest percentage of respondents indicating that they would primarily address by going to a school administrator (72.9%)
- Two categories of violent writing (self-inflicted – 58.5%, and fantasy violence – 32.9%) evidenced the highest percentage of respondents choosing to respond by addressing with a counselor or other mental health provider.
- Across the range of potential primary responses, the four least selected responses included: grading the work normally, ignoring the violent content and considering aspects of grammar and style, contacting the parents, and “I don’t know what my primary response would be.”
- Common to both sub-groups was a clarity of response for the category of self-inflicted violent writing. No respondents marked that they either graded such writing normally or that they had no clue how to respond. Both subgroups marked that they would seek the advice of a guidance counselor or other mental health provider as their primary response.
- For the category of direct threat violent writing, the majority of respondents similarly shied away from grading normally or doubt of response, and instead marked that they would either contact a school administrator (72.9%) or converse with a counselor (17.6%).

Additional analysis of the relationship between summed participant responses (the sum of all responses from the “How did you respond...?” and “How would you respond if...?”) and years of educational experience was attempted, but there was not enough of a distribution in the responses for these categories to lead to a meaningful test of significance.

For both sub-categories of participants (those who had and those who had not encountered any given category of violent writing), the answer choices in this series of response question fell into two distinct groups: responses that involved handling the situation alone, with the student, or without any type of outside assistance/advice, and responses that involved turning to other people outside of the classroom (counselors, administrators, parents, and other teachers). Although participants overwhelmingly indicated that a primary response was one of addressing the writing directly with the student, and in many cases grading violent texts normally without discussion, data show that turning to counselors or mental health specialists and local administrators is a common primary response for certain types of violent writing, namely most categories outside of shock effect/gory writing.

In addition to patterns of response, participant response data further show that teachers respond specifically to violent texts. When provided the choice of “I don’t know...,” only a minimal number of teachers (less than 5) selected the response. Qualitative data further shows that among teachers who previously responded to violent writing episodes, they were rather specific in actions taken (Example: “I spoke to...I contacted...I turned in” etc.). Yet, specific responses do not minimize the presence of self-doubt. The high percentage of teachers indicating contacting a counselor or other mental health provider or an administrator reveals that teachers know or seem to know when a situation is beyond their area of expertise or ability to handle. Perception data addressed in the following section provide quantitative proof of this claim.

Question Three: Preparedness Data

Question: Do high school English teachers feel prepared to respond to violent writing?

Across the seven categories of violent writing, the majority of participants selected

feeling “fairly well prepared” to respond to violent writing, although exceptions to this pattern existed, including the fact that summed percentages of positive (“fairly well” and “very well”) and negative (“not” and “minimally prepared”) preparedness categories indicate a general trend of negative preparedness to respond to violent texts. A thorough discussion of these trends/patterns follows.

Participants rated their perceived level of preparedness to address each category of violent writing on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from “not prepared” (value = 1) and “minimally prepared” (value = 2), to “fairly well prepared” (value = 3) or “very well prepared” (value = 4). The mode for each category’s distribution of preparedness scores is included in Table 4.11:

Table 4.11

Mode Preparedness Scores

Category	Mode Preparedness Score
Shock Effect & Gory	3.00
Victim	3.00
Self-Inflicted	2.00 & 3.00
Obsession	3.00
Fantasy with Indirect Threats	2.00
Direct Threat	3.00
Mixed	2.00

Table 4.12 presents the percentage of respondents indicating perceived preparedness for each category of violent writing. With two exceptions, the category of “fairly well

prepared” either tied for or received the highest percentage of respondents across the four categories.

Table 4.12

Perception of Teacher Preparedness: Percentages

Level of Teacher Preparedness: Percentage of Respondents Reporting				
Category of Violent Writing	Not Prepared	Minimally Prepared	Fairly Well Prepared	Very Well Prepared
Shock Effect & Gory Violence	6%	30%	52%	12%
Victim Violence	10%	31%	47%	12%
Self-Inflicted Violence	11%	41%	41%	7%
Obsession Violence	16%	35%	41%	8%
Fantasy/Indirect Threat Violence	15%	45%	35%	5%
Direct Threat Violence	22%	30%	42%	6%
Mixed Violence	17%	43%	37%	2%

The two categories that were exceptions to the pattern of “fairly well prepared” teachers were fantasy violence containing indirect threats and mixed violence writing, with more participants indicating they felt minimally (45% and 43% respectively) rather than fairly well prepared to respond (35% and 37% respectively).

Table 4.12 presents another interesting pattern in the data. If the four categories of preparedness are divided down the middle, with “not” and “minimally prepared” indicative

of negative levels of preparedness, and “fairly” and “very well prepared” indicative of positive levels of preparedness, then a significant percentage of sample respondents are not prepared to address violent writing. When percentages in the “not” and “minimally prepared” categories were summed, up to 36% of the sample in shock effect, and 60% in fantasy and mixed violence indicated a lack of preparedness. In fact, across most categories, the total percentage of participants showing negative levels of preparedness (either “not” or “minimally prepared”) is greater than the summed percentages of participants showing positive levels of preparedness (sum of “fairly well prepared” and “very well prepared”). Mixed violence shows 60% negatively prepared, as compared to 39% positively prepared, while fantasy violence shows 60% negatively prepared as compared to 40% positively prepared. Across 5 of the 7 categories (exceptions included shock effect and victim violence) the summed percentage of respondents in the negative preparedness categories was greater than the summed percentage of respondents in the positive preparedness categories.

Results also show that for any given category, the fewest number/percentage of respondents selected the two most extreme categories of perceived preparedness – not prepared or very well prepared. Without exception, each of the seven categories saw the majority of participants responding as minimally or fairly well prepared. A breakdown of the total sum of responses for the four levels of perceived preparedness is indicated in Table 4.13, data that further support the finding that few teachers report feeling not or very well prepared to respond to any category of violent writing.

Table 4.13

Summed Responses: Teacher Preparedness to Respond

Category of Preparedness	Number of Respondents Summed from 7 categories
Not Prepared	84
Minimally Prepared	219
Fairly Well Prepared	253
Very Well Prepared	44

Additional analysis of preparedness levels for each category of violent writing found the following:

- Teachers are most prepared (“fairly” or “very well prepared”) to respond to shock effect or gory writing and least prepared (“minimally” or “not prepared”) to respond to direct threat violence, as evidenced by the percentage of respondents selecting each category of preparedness.
- Participant perceptions of unpreparedness (as indicated by “not or minimally prepared” responses) seemed to increase as the level of potential threat in the writing increased. Example, only 6% of respondents said they were “not prepared” to address shock effect or gory writing, while 22% said they were unprepared to address direct threat violent writing.
- Three categories of violent writing evidenced close to half of responding participants indicating they were just “minimally” prepared to respond. The three categories, listed in decreasing order, were: Fantasy violence containing indirect threats (45%),

- mixed violence (43%), and self-inflicted violence (41%).
- The two categories evidencing the greatest percentage of teachers who felt “very well prepared” to respond (shock effect/gory and victim violence writing) were the two categories that according to frequency data are most evidenced among participants. Despite the results of the non-significant Pearson chi square analysis (see results in Table 4.14), frequency of encounters, at face value, seems to correspond to high levels of absolute preparedness to respond.

Beyond analysis of teacher perceived preparedness to respond, data were analyzed by category to determine potential relationships between reported frequencies of encounters with the violent texts and participant levels of preparedness to respond. A lack of response distribution did not lend the data to a meaningful analysis of significance, except for the category of direct threat writing. See Table 4.14 for output showing no significant relationship between number of encounters and teacher reported preparedness to respond to direct threat writing.

Table 4.14

Chi Square Analyses: Frequency vs. Preparedness

Category of Violent Writing	Chi Square Results
Direct Threat Violence	$\chi^2 (3, N= 86) = 3.72, p = .292$

Due to a common perception within educational circles that training or study within an area of concern promotes competence, preparedness data were considered against the data regarding prior teacher training. A low percentage of “very well prepared” teachers for any given category may be explained by the statistic showing that only 10 participants (11.9%)

previously received professional development or training specifically related to teacher response to disturbing or violent writing, meaning 88.10% (74 respondents) report receiving no training related to the construct.

Among the 9 responses of those who provided a written explanation of the prior trainings, four indicated that training was either at the “bare minimum” or anywhere from 30 minutes to 1-2 hours annually. A teacher who previously worked in an alternative school setting indicated that her training was ongoing for 11 years, while another participant enrolled in graduate school had completed adolescent psychology and counseling courses that touched on this theme. Data therefore reveal that few teachers among the sample participants have received any form of significant training regarding proper response to violent student texts.

In addition to teachers reporting few response trainings, results show the majority of participants (45 or 54.2%) do not know if their schools/school districts have safe school policies addressing the matter of violent writing and/or teacher/school response to disturbing or violent writing (see Table 4.15).

Table 4.15

Participant Knowledge of Policy

Policy Question Responses		
Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Yes, we have a policy	14	16.9%
No, we do not have a policy	24	28.9%
I don't know	45	54.2%

Although almost half could not answer the question about current policies, when asked how they felt about their school's or district's need to utilize such a policy, an overwhelming majority of participants agreed (64%), and 25% strongly agreed that such a policy was needed. The data revealing that few participants have completed training related to response to violent texts, more than 50% do not know if they have policies governing response, although most believe that there should be a policy, expands the picture of teacher preparedness. Data provide insight into potential causes of ill-prepared teachers.

Qualitative data were also considered in regard to teacher perceived preparedness. Written teacher responses to the survey question about a prior encounter with violent writing reveal that while teachers primarily seem to make specific responses to violent texts, challenging circumstances appear to increase levels of doubt and bring feelings of preparedness into question. Written remarks that show low levels of teacher preparedness or general discomfort with violent texts include some of the following:

- “We struggled with wondering if the writing should be taken at face value as a threat against me or another person, or if it should be taken more ‘metaphorically’ ...”
- “I was extremely disturbed, needless to say.”
- “I did have one incident of victim violence...It turned out to be a false claim on the part of the student. I have continued to monitor the student as I am not convinced it was fabricated.”
- After discussing a response that included student and student mentor discussions, a teacher remarked, “I guess time will tell.”
- “I had one student in 11 years who wrote something that freaked me out and

made me feel like I was ill prepared for this encounter.”

- “I was very disturbed when a former student of mine showed me his original poetry of a somewhat violent nature.”

These participant quotes show that confronting and responding to violent writing can be troubling, and that certain encounters leave teachers feeling highly unprepared to respond to such texts. But the pattern that emerges from the interwoven quantitative and qualitative data is one that can be summarized as follows: Although when presented with any given category of violent writing, teachers generally indicate that they are fairly well prepared to respond, trend data find that a higher percentage of respondents are actually negatively rather prepared to respond. Additionally, data show that specific texts or circumstances impact reported levels of preparedness. Teachers feel the least prepared to respond to texts evidencing direct threats. For example, the teacher who remarked that only one student writing in an eleven-year period freaked her out referenced a student text in which a male student composed a letter to the Columbine High School shooters explaining that he understood why they committed the atrocious act that killed twelve people.

Situational preparedness is perhaps the best term for teachers’ perceived level of preparedness for responding to violent writing; meaning preparedness may be dependent on other situational factors. According to experts (Mohandie, 2000/2002) in school violence management, wise schools utilize comprehensive threat and risk assessment procedures that triangulate a variety of inputs to formulate an accurate picture of threat, meaning a single writing sample should not be taken in isolation to determine that violent acts are imminent, nor should non-individualized common responses accompany different circumstances. Similarly, teacher responses from the current study seem to indicate that their perceived level

of preparedness to properly respond to violent texts may vary with circumstances, a finding that is potentially positive.

Summary

Data analysis for each of the three research questions – frequency, response, and preparedness to respond – found that violent writing is a high school English classroom phenomenon, although annual classroom encounters remain minimal, and in some cases, virtually non-existent for the majority of secondary English teachers. Additionally teachers frequently respond to such texts by corresponding with the student or with a counselor/other mental health provider, and primarily utilize the input of administrators when texts involve direct threats. Teachers rarely turn to their colleagues or parents for assistance, and many times just grade a text normally regardless of content. Individually, the greatest majority of English teachers report feeling fairly well prepared to respond to violent texts, although sample trend data find participants in general to be less prepared, with the greatest percentages reporting minimal or no preparedness for five of the categories of writing. A discussion of these findings and their implications for further research follow in Chapter V.

Chapter V: Discussion

Purpose of the Study

The current study was designed to explore the phenomenon of violent student writing in North Carolina high school English classrooms, with teachers providing data across three areas of interest. The three guiding research questions concentrated the study to issues of frequency of, teacher response to, and teacher perception of preparedness to respond to violent writing samples. Analyses showed that the phenomenon exists, although at low rates of frequency across multiple categories, and that teachers report mixed levels of preparedness to respond, most often choosing to respond through communication with the student or by consulting a counselor, mental health worker, or administrator. A discussion of the results along with implications for further research follows.

Discussion

Frequency

Question: How frequently do high school English teachers encounter violent writing among the 9th-12th grade students enrolled in English class?

Frequency data found that violent writing is encountered infrequently during the course of a typical school year, although some spikes across specific categories existed (highest number of encounters reported for shock effect/gory and victim violence writing). Additionally, at least one category, direct threat violence writing, was rarely encountered. Specific spikes and dips in frequency levels were expected, as the provided categories represented a range of potential threat levels associated with violent themes. Although the field of threat and risk assessment (O'Toole, 2000) supports the notion that no single input, including a writing sample, can be examined in isolation if a proper assessment of potential threats is to occur, some of the provided categories would raise more concern than others.

The first two categories, shock effect/gory and victim violence, represent categories that would potentially evoke the least concern from threat and risk professionals, as they express no direct threats and provide a forum for individuals to share of prior or current threats to their safety, including episodes of abuse, etc. The researcher anticipated that the potentially innocuous nature of shock effect and victim violent writing would yield data indicating a higher number of reported teacher encounters, and that was in fact the case.

Direct and indirect threat violence writing (fantasy violence containing indirect threats), on the other hand, represent expressions that according to the FBI (O'Toole, 2000) may represent a higher potential of actual threat/risk. The FBI explains that the more detailed a threat, the more imminent the risk. As defined in the current study, direct threat writing is specific. It entails a writer's plan to bring about some form of harm, with specific dates, times, locations indicated, and it is an expression that the FBI claims requires immediate law enforcement involvement. Indirect threat writing or expressions, on the other hand, may not carry quite as high of a level of risk, but they are nonetheless expressions that require investigations. Even vaguely described intentions of harm can be troublesome. The higher level of risk potentially represented by these two categories of violent writing led the researcher to believe that teacher encounters with such texts would be minimal, and they were.

Very few participants (nine) encountered direct threat writing at a rate of 1-5 examples annually. These data show that at the low end, sample participants saw up to nine examples; at the high end (as many as 5 per participant) they could have seen as many as 45 examples. Extremely high rates of direct threat writing among North Carolina classrooms would have been alarming, and the categorical nature of response in the current survey make

it challenging to say exactly how many incidents of direct threat writing were evidenced, but suffice it to say that encounters were more infrequent. The lower frequency of direct threat writing episodes, as compared to data from the other six categories, may thus be interpreted as a positive finding.

However, a minimal number of encounters with direct threat writing also signals a potential concern. Nine out of 87 participants indicated that they encounter between one and five examples of direct threat writing in a typical school year. That statistic equates to almost 10% of the sample encountering anywhere from nine (one per respondent) to 45 examples (five per respondent), and represents a potentially strong risk. If the number of encountered examples of direct threat writing significantly exceeded the minimum of nine encounters, then risk levels increased and may be increasing for teachers across the state.

These findings beg the question of participant understanding. Did sample participants misunderstand the definition of direct threat writing, or are the data an accurate reflection of a sub-population of North Carolina's high school youth who carry specific violent intentions of harm? The history of school shootings reveals that while school rampages are rare, it only takes one violence-oriented perpetrator to cause life-changing harm to individuals, schools, and families. If, in a typical school teachers encounter anywhere from 9-45 examples of direct threat writing, then this merits further study of the category of direct threat violent writing.

Frequency data for the remaining categories of violent writing showed that encounters in a typical school year are minimal, although spikes in the self-inflicted category (at least 36 respondents encounter between 1-5 examples annually; 1 respondent sees between 6-10 examples), and obsession category (39 respondents seeing between 1-5

examples annually, and four seeing between 6-10 examples annually) may be reason for concern. The self-inflicted writing category involves suicidal writings, among other things. Common to prior school shooters was a fascination with suicidal expressions and obsession violence, with particular obsessive interests in all things German (Nazi period), weapons, violent song lyrics, or cultic movies/books showing violent incidents (Fast, 2009; Langman, 2009; Lieberman, 2008). The fact that NC students are evidencing writings carrying obsessive thoughts or expressions to bring about self-harm is perhaps not so much threatening as it is disturbing from a mental health perspective.

North Carolina *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* data from 2009 show that between 8.6% (12th graders) and 11.8% (tenth graders) of North Carolina high school students (grades 9-12) attempted in the past 12 months (North Carolina Division of Public Health, 2009). Although results from the current violent writing survey may not indicate that students have or are contemplating anything violent, data showing that they have submitted self-inflicted themes support state quantitative data indicating interest in self-harm. The triangulation of data sources indicate, at a bare minimum, a need for mental health interventions from trained providers. The tricky part for schools is whether that professionally trained provider is a counselor, psychologist, or a law enforcement deputy.

Response

Question: What are the typical responses of high school English teachers who encounter violent writing?

Upon receipt of a violent expression, the classroom teacher and school is faced with a need to respond. Educational research (Brookhart, 1994) shows that responses involving assessment of student work are typically subjective processes in which teachers may struggle, and case law (Hudson, 2003, 2005) reveals that responses may reach extreme

levels. Data from the current study showed that the primary response of most teachers falls into one of three categories, although certain response data were surprising.

The most commonly selected response was that of communicating with the student (either through written comments or verbal communication), while the response category of contact with counselors/mental health providers was not far behind. These responses evidence best practice, as the teachers decided to communicate directly with the source of the writing, or to seek out those with more training in the mental health arena. In fact, information about prior incidents of school shootings, including Kip Kinkle's Thurston High School rampage and Klebold's Columbine shooting, show that teachers for both boys contacted school counselors and parents when the violent student texts evoked concern (Fast, 2008, Lieberman, 2008).

The surprising aspect of the response data involved the lack of participants indicating involvement with colleagues or parents. The response categories of teacher to teacher or teacher to parent contact received some of the lowest percentage of respondent marks. The researcher believed that teachers would frequently turn to their teaching peers for advice or contact parents upon receipt of violent texts that caused teacher distress, as psychological experts who have addressed the lives of school shooters note that improved school communication between teachers (Langman, 2009) and between teachers and parents (Newman, 2004) is important for successful school identification of potential risks. Langman (2009) notes that teacher-parent conferences in which student academic and behavioral concerns are addressed could move schools forward in their attempt to better identify violent warning signs.

But study participants rarely selected the responses of consulting with their

colleagues or parents. The results can therefore be explained by three possibilities: (a) teachers felt uncomfortable turning to others; (b) teachers believed it was unnecessary to turn to peers or parents as the primary mode of response; or (c) teachers turned to their peers and parents as part of a multi-step response including conversations with various parties (administrators, students, parents, etc). As noted in the limitations and delimitations section, the structure of the questions requesting a primary response denied teachers the opportunity to show multi-step responses.

The limiting nature of response questions may have impacted the data around response to direct threat violence writing. The severity of the threat potentially indicated by any piece of direct threat writing might lead to the conclusion that the teacher's response was a multi-step response of contacting the school administration, parents, law enforcement, etc. Although many of the sample participants who encountered direct threat writing indicated contact with administrators, the quantitative data yielded no information about multi-step responses or the extent of law enforcement and mental health involvement with the incident.

As with the frequency data, response data showing that many teachers addressed writings directly with students, counselors, or administrators begs the question of mental health interventions; do the current data point to a need for increased school or community based mental health services for students? Professional mental health assistance for potentially concerning episodes of violent writing highlights an inherent school conflict between maintaining safe school environments and personal student rights. Public schools rarely, if ever, mandate a student to seek out mental health interventions, as such a mandate would require the school to pay for the services. Public schools are governmental units with non-profit status, meaning revenue for the funding of services beyond those provided by

school-based counselors or social workers is limited.

Additionally, the mandating of mental health services requires a school to intrude on the student's right to freedom of expression. As noted in chapter two, students have rights and may take creative liberties within a school environment. Yet, schools are mandated to protect their youth, and that includes addressing any potential threat to overall safety. If a school staff member decides that a student written expression is alarming/threatening, school administration is required to act; but if they act on incorrect impulses for behaviors that are in reality non-threatening, a student and his/her family run the risk of being stigmatized, traumatized, and facing interventions for a problem that never existed in the first place. The mere nature of the K-12 world, a world in which defragmented conversation is the norm rather than the exception (Newman, 2004), may lead to rash decisions that carry unintended and negative consequences, as evidenced by Hudson's (2003, 2005) case law research.

Although proper response to violent texts is challenging, sometimes the best choice is clear. The current data showing that a small percentage of North Carolina English teachers encountered youth submitting direct threat violent writing indicates that those youth may be in need of mental health interventions. Direct threat writing means a student is ready to act on described impulses and has given careful thought to the manner in which to bring harm to self or others. The researcher cannot help but ask, "Where are these students today, and did they receive mental health interventions of any type?" If the students behind previously submitted direct threat violent writings are still North Carolina public high school or post-secondary students who failed to receive proper interventions for their escalated potential for harm, then schools in North Carolina are possibly housing students who carry the potential for harm to self or others.

Preparedness

Question: Do high school English teachers feel prepared to respond to violent writing?

Data found that teachers, for the most part, feel either minimally or fairly well prepared to respond to violent writing, with trend data showing that the greatest percentage of teachers are negatively prepared (either “not” or “minimally prepared”) to respond to violent texts. Extreme levels of preparedness (either “not prepared” or “very well prepared”) were infrequently selected, although higher reported levels of unpreparedness were prevalent among the least evidenced category of violent writing – direct threat writing. Similarly, teachers felt the most prepared to respond to forms of violent writing that are most often evidenced, shock effect/gory and victim violence.

Although data results were somewhat predictable, with the belief that less frequently encountered categories would result in lower percentages of prepared teachers, and higher frequencies of encounters would equate to higher percentages of positively prepared teachers, the summed percentage totals showing that for five of seven categories teachers were negatively prepared contrasted starkly to individual categorical data in which the greatest percentage of respondents selected fairly well prepared as their final response. Yet, individual teacher reports of fairly high levels of preparedness are understandable when the data are reflected against educational research on the culture of public education.

As the researcher knows from first-hand experience and educational research (Flinders, 1988), the life of a teacher is often one of isolation. For the most part, schools tend to foster environments in which few collaborative efforts exist. Teachers struggle to find opportunities to engage in professional dialog. The culture of isolation addressed by Flinders (1988) considers the notion that teachers are both physically and psychologically isolated

from other teachers, meaning they may choose to remain self-contained, even if their physical environment does not already drive such a culture. High rates of individually reported teacher preparedness to properly respond is therefore understandable in light of this construct of teacher isolation; a construct that drives teachers to be self-sufficient and self-contained.

However, if a culture of isolation and self-sufficiency drives higher perceptions of preparedness among teachers, how does one explain the finding that a comparison of frequency and preparedness data find teachers across many categories reporting positive levels of preparedness to respond to categories of violent texts infrequently encountered, or that they have not been trained to address? Feeling prepared to address writings that carry minimal threat levels (shock effect or victim violence) is understandable. But reported feelings of positive preparedness to address something they rarely encounter begs the question of “Why?” With general trend data showing quite negative levels of preparedness, and response data showing that teachers report involving other school staff in responses, why do individual, categorical results find the greater percentage of teachers reporting competency to address violent texts?

Teacher competence to address infrequently encountered samples of student writing may stem from the fact that teachers approach the educational process from a creative rather than a safety perspective. As evidenced by the history of school shootings, writings that psychologists say indicate a propensity for violence or carry markers of dysfunctional tendencies may go unaddressed by school staff. They potentially go unaddressed because teachers approach school-based writings from a pedagogical and evaluative orientation (Sperling, 1996). Although Sperling (1996) found that a teacher may also approach student

writing with a social, emotional, or interpretive orientation, her entire framework of teacher as reader orientation points to the fact that a teacher responds to student writing with some notion of an academic purpose. Searle and Dillon (1980) similarly found that teacher responses to student writing focused more on form than content, with data indicating that “...the teachers saw writing as practice in mastering forms of writing, beginning with a mastery of mechanics and developing a mastery of large structures” (p. 23). Teachers who read, examine, and respond to student content through an evaluative and instructional viewpoint stands in direct contrast to a psychologist or threat/risk expert who reads a text for behavioral clues.

Some might argue that it is not the duty of a teacher to identify writings carrying a warning of violence, as their primary duty is that of addressing the writing from an educational rather than a psychological perspective. Cheryl Alton (Alton & Pfeiffer, 1993), a Purdue University-Calumet English professor, explains of allowing students to share personal crises and revealing texts:

I’m not sure that we English instructors are qualified to cross the lines where perhaps only trained psychologists should tread. Whether we wish to or not, we become personally involved with confidences and dilemmas that we have not been adequately trained to handle....I wonder if it is my place to comment on extremely personal journals and student compositions. Could my comments unwittingly push that potentially suicidal student over the edge? It’s a painful burden both for the student and for me (p. 667).

Teacher competence may therefore rest in the notion that their only job is that of responding academically, not psychologically. Responding academically (assessing the value or worth of

a student assignment) is something that teachers are trained to do in teacher preparation programs required for state licensure. They are not trained to respond psychologically, nor do they have educational backgrounds focused on the behavioral sciences. If reading texts for purely academic input, writings that are indicative of potential real-world violent behaviors may go unnoticed, but teachers would not know they have missed vital clues, because it is not their job to notice those clues.

Although individually reported high levels of teacher confidence to address violent texts may lead to the conclusion that policies or training around the phenomenon are not needed, such a conclusion is narrow and would be refuted by violence and threat/risk experts who state that comprehensive approaches to violence prevention involve knowledge of warning signs, risks, or concerns. Current survey data showing negative levels of teacher preparedness to respond to violent texts is one example of troubling data that could lead to improved teacher training. Langman (2009) recommends that comprehensive school threat assessment procedures include training for staff and students to recognize potential warning signs and to know how to report these concerns.

Violent student writing is very different from any other form of student writing because it may in fact imply a desire to cause violence. As explained, educators are not trained or educated to know the difference between something that is in fact alarming/threatening and something that is merely creative. Schools typically provide policies and training for staff around behaviors that may be violent, including bullying, fighting, or other aggressive behaviors. Violent writing is therefore no different from these violent-prone behaviors of youth. If we want to believe that we have safe school environments, then improving training and policies for school staff around this very

questionable form of student expression carrying a potential threat for real-world violence seems imperative. Although data suggest that the phenomenon is a rather low-frequency phenomenon across the state of North Carolina, it nonetheless exists, and teachers need to feel the support of school staff and state leaders when faced with a form of writing that can, as evidenced by Columbine, result in law suits for teacher neglect to properly identify a threatening writing sample.

Limitations and Delimitations

Although the current study deepened the understanding of the phenomenon of violent writing, the study was not without its limiting factors, and results point to areas of recommended improvement for future study.

Despite adherence to procedural and ethical standards for this study of, the research process faced several limitations in regard to typology, sampling, instrumentation, and generalization of the findings to other settings. The definition of violent writing and associated typology provided for the study evolved from research providing examples of previously encountered violent texts in a variety of settings, through discussions with a forensic psychologist well acquainted with violent texts in the process of threat assessment, and consideration of widely accepted definitions and typologies associated with the construct of violence. Yet, a qualitative case study with a representative group of high school English teachers could have preceded the current study, and potentially yielded a more thorough violent writing typology specific to the school context.

Selection of study sample participants encountered several challenges associated with the release of email addresses for teachers. Once a random sample was selected, email addresses for each individual were sought online by reviewing the participants' school or

district websites, as the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction keeps no database of teacher email addresses. The web-based nature of the survey instrument required email addresses for participants. Although it was believed that most school systems in the state published email addresses online, this was in fact not the case.

The researcher found that several of the 115 school districts in the state provide a general email form that individuals can use to contact teachers, and that this form refrains from providing direct email information. In such cases, attempts to call the schools directly to get the email addresses proved futile, as the districts refused to release individual teacher information. Despite attempts to discover email addresses through repeated website searches, some participants had to be replaced with additional randomly selected participants because of a lack of online contact information providing email addresses. Yet, all sample participants were randomly selected and the final sample yielded teachers from all three geographic areas of the state of North Carolina.

It should also be noted that the target population for the study involved 9th-12th grade English teachers in regular public high schools, meaning those who taught at charter schools, alternative high schools, specialized career centers, or early or middle colleges were not included in the study. The decision to exclude teachers from specialized schools resulted from the belief that smaller, alternative school environments served a very select group of students often possessing a higher level of personal and academic need, a condition that could serve to drastically alter the types or amounts of violent writing evidenced from students in non-alternative high schools. Yet, it is fair to say that the exclusion of the alternative high school population is a study delimitation, as the teachers and students working in or served in those environments provide unique perspectives that may have

deepened the richness of the data.

Instrumentation limitations were also evidenced. As previously noted, concern was expressed regarding the limiting nature of answer choices for questions about response to violent writing. One expert panelist, along with two participants explained that teacher response is not necessarily an either/or situation. Response in the classroom may involve a series of steps that results in multiple responses, including talking to the student, contacting a counselor, and the parents. With the exception of open-response questions, the instrument forced participants to choose a primary response from prior episodes of or potential future encounters with violent texts.

Additionally, the instrument made no provision for identifying the exact number of students submitting previously encountered violent texts in academic settings. For example, in the category of direct threat writing, it is not known if the nine teachers who typically encounter that writing are facing examples from just one teenager or a multitude of youth. Violent writing samples from two (as compared to 20) youth, particularly in the category of direct threat writing, is an important distinction. Future instruments might add a question about number of youth submitting texts, and consider a series of responses that requests participants to rank order any or all choices that they might select when engaged in the process of response.

Delimitations included the restricted sample selection to North Carolina 9th-12th grade English teachers, meaning teachers from other content areas, levels of educational work, or geographic regions were not considered. The limited scope of the current study presents a threat to external validity, meaning the researcher cannot fully generalize results to non-North Carolina public school districts or teachers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future study of violent writing in public schools include the following: (a) Deepened investigation into the types of violent writing encountered by high school teachers, (b) Expansion of study to involve consideration of violent texts at all grade levels across the K-12 spectrum, (c) Expansion of study for evidence of violent writing across multiple subjects; (d) Research with K-12 students; and a new study specifically designed to examine the influencing factors on teacher decision-making processes when engaged in response.

The recommendation for expanded study is necessitated by the narrow focus of the current study and the expanded potential of future study to more accurately inform educational practice. As explained in the introductory chapter, violence is a complicated and multifaceted construct. Violent writing is similarly a multifaceted construct requiring varied levels of study, starting with those most directly impacted by classroom-based violent texts; the teacher and the students. Expanded study of violent writing fulfills Creswell's (2005) first reason for conducting research; to expand knowledge. Although the current study serves to expand what is known about violent writing in academic settings, it is not a complete or definitive body of research. There is much yet to know about this construct. But other reasons exist for expanded study, namely, the need to improve educational practice and inform policy, two additional research purposes submitted by Creswell (2005). Improved educational practice and revised policy are steps toward educational improvement.

A deeper investigation into the exact types of violent writing evidenced in classrooms should also involve a qualitative research approach utilizing teacher interviews and think-aloud protocols (Kucan and Beck, 1997) designed to understand the psychological thought

processes of participants engaged in the act of reading and responding to student violent texts.

Violent writings are never isolated to just a 9th-12th grade level. They can evolve from youth representing varied age groups, from the elementary (Fletcher, 2006) to post-secondary (Berman, 1994, 2001) years. The current study was limited to the high school setting because of the researcher's interest in secondary education, but the phenomenon extends to other educational levels and curricula. To limit the phenomenon of violent writings/drawings to the English classroom inhibits a full understanding of the true phenomenon and the scope of its existence. Therefore, future study across multiple subject areas is recommended.

Missing from the completed study was the perspective of the student submitting violent texts. The exclusion of student insight was purposeful, as the researcher was interested in teacher encounters, responses, etc., but the student perspective could play a vital role in future research. Behavioral scientists and forensic psychologists, particularly associated with the FBI's behavioral sciences unit at Quantico, provide an example of expert use of writings and responses of known criminals to create more successful threat assessment procedures. Similarly, educational researchers should consider both the writings and explanations of those students providing the writings to help teachers understand why students might provide such writings within an academic setting. As previously noted, the line between creative thought and an actual cry for help through written text is a fine line. Forensic (Mohandie, 2000/2002) and post-secondary researchers (Newman, 2004) acknowledge that teachers are rarely in a position to know the difference between creative and violently suggestive texts. In-depth conversations with students who provide violent texts and yet never engage in violent acts would provide a deeper understanding of the creative

writing process and students' reasons for submitting texts that raise eyebrows and elicit more questions than answers.

A final recommendation for future study involves attention to teacher decision-making processes. Educational and psychological research providing studies about teacher decision-making processes (Oser, 1991) reveals that decisions, particularly morally complex decisions, are influenced by a multitude of factors. For these reasons, any quantitative attempt to identify specific responses formed by a potentially complex decision-making process is lacking. As noted, think aloud protocols could assist with understanding influencing factors that drive to final teacher responses around violent texts.

Policy and Practice Implications

The study shows that the North Carolina public education system needs to pursue three areas of changed practice or policy, as current data indicate a concern around the phenomenon of violent writing. The three areas include fiscal practice, safe school policy revision, and response procedures.

Fiscal Practice

In addition to limited fiscal resources to address student concerns, one of the greatest hindrances to successful school threat/risk assessment processes related to violent writings or behaviors is the lack of highly trained staff. Schools in North Carolina are currently entering their fourth consecutive year of cutting local school district budgets, due to a state and national recession that currently finds the state at least \$4 billion below projected revenue. Restricted funding leads to position cuts, and when it comes to determining whether to cut a teacher/principal or a social worker/counselor who may conduct threat/risk assessments, schools are more likely to cut the mental health staff, as they do not provide direct

instruction.

In light of this, a fiscal condition that promises no immediate or easy relief, schools must begin to think creatively about funding sources. Although grant funding is also facing significant cuts, maintaining safe, violence-free schools remains a priority for the federal Departments of Justice and Education. As a result, millions of dollars in federal grant funding to assist schools and non-profits in making schools safer places are appropriated. But these large grants require partnerships and collaborative efforts, which are sometimes challenging for schools. School systems interested in maintaining or expanding through grant funding highly trained mental health providers to conduct appropriate threat/risk assessment procedures to help schools identify potential threats must think beyond themselves. They should open their door to partnerships with local law enforcement, juvenile justice, health departments, etc. to look at ways of forming unique, collaborative efforts designed to make everyone in the community safety.

If schools lack the fiscal resources to train individuals or to hire new staff to conduct these assessments, then the burden exists to look at ways in which combined fiscal efforts with local mental health entities solves the problem. For example, the researcher's North Carolina public school system has established a creative partnership with local mental health agencies in which shared funding between the partners allows the school system to provide expanded intervention services necessary for youth exhibiting alarming behaviors or expressions. This type of partnership is critical to overall school safety. The potential threat associated with certain violent expressions leaves a school/school system unable to say, "We just don't have the money to hire people to do this!" Creative fiscal and community approaches to providing needed interventions/services must become the norm.

Safe School Policy Revisions

North Carolina law §115C-105.47 (Local Safe School Plan, 2010) requires school systems to have a safe school plan in place. Additionally, the law includes 15 required elements, including a way to identify youth who are academically at risk or are disruptive/disorderly in some manner. The law, though, makes no mention of violent expressions. While it clearly mandates that schools have a procedure in place for keeping school environments safe, including the creation of alternative learning environments and clear roles for superintendents, principals, etc., it is at heart a broad law that provides little to no input regarding specifics of a local safe school plan. In fact, the statute states that plans must address responses to students who physically assault teachers, but no mention is given toward responses for students who express written threats that may harm a teacher or others. Although technical assistance is provided to school districts by the Safe School division at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, with local plans currently audited every three years, there is no right or wrong approach to completing a local plan. This means that school systems in the state of North Carolina may evidence a variety of safe school plans that potentially address violent expressions in a myriad of ways, including no stated procedures for addressing the phenomenon.

Current data showed that some systems/schools have policies that include references to violent expressions, although many participants had no clue whether their units address this phenomenon. The lack of potential consistency among state plans and lack of participant knowledge of local plans that might address the phenomenon suggest a significant area of change. The state legislature should consider amending statute §115C- 105.47 to include a specific reference to violent expressions, including writings or drawing. This change might

become a 16th required element in local plans, requiring all state systems to address in some manner the existence of violent texts and their potential to alert officials threats to school safety. The current 15th required element essentially states that schools are required to include any other information that they deem necessary and appropriate for a plan. Response to violent writing must be deemed “necessary,” as it can be one of many critical clues in determining anticipated threats to school safety. Although state laws are often designed to be flexible, this is a case where the state law cannot be devoid of or fuzzy in its attention to the potential clues represented by violent expressions.

Response Procedures

Current data further reveal that even if school systems are addressing violent writing in their safe school plans, few teachers know that policies or procedures around the phenomenon exist. As a result, it is necessary for school systems to do a better job of training school staff and around awareness and response. North Carolina schools regularly conduct fire drills, tornado drills, and lock downs to practice proper response to the physical threats of fire, natural disasters, and physical assaults/attacks on buildings. In similar fashion, all North Carolina schools (including elementary and middle) need to learn how to respond to written expressions that may carry similar levels of threat/harm. It is a sad commentary on the state of North Carolina if public schools believe that tornados, fires, and bank robbers merit more attention and response training than the direct written clues of students in crisis and on the verge of violent breakdowns.

The researcher recommends that the Safe Schools division of North Carolina create a violent writing response procedure document to serve as a resource for school systems. The document could mirror certain aspects of the Virginia Tech policy, although it is not

recommended that such a document become part of state law/policy. The document should detail appropriate interventions/responses for classroom teachers confronted with violent expressions, and school systems should incorporate these thoughts and practices into safe school trainings for staff members. Recommended responses could include the need to begin with school counselors or other mental health providers already in existence in school settings, as well as the need for each school and district to designate a clear threat/risk assessment supervisor who assists teachers/administrators in starting the process of appropriately assessing potential written threats.

Because §115C 105.47 (Local Safe School Plan, 2010) requires safe school plans to designate the role of staff for addressing safe school procedures and restoring order, (principals, teachers, etc), identifying a person charged with the task of threat/risk assessment procedures should be included in the safe school/crisis response plan. Districts could further adopt a response document that details recommended procedures for moving a classroom concern to the level of a full scale assessment of threat. Greater detail about this process opens the door to the completion of multi-faceted assessment procedures; procedures that may be lacking in the hurried life of public schooling.

Although conversations with North Carolina's Director of the Safe Schools Division reveal that state safety audits find North Carolina schools to be in compliance with safe school mandates, evidencing appropriate crisis response plans, and practicing necessary drills, etc., (Personal Communication, K. Gattis, June 8, 2011), the manner in which local teachers may be addressing or failing to address violent expressions that potentially create a trail of indicators for school threat, is simply not known. The role that violent writings assume in any school's safe school and crisis response plan is at the discretion of the local

school boards. This creates a state scenario in which more questions than answers evolve from consideration of violent student writings, meaning more research is required to determine how district are or are not instructing staff to address this phenomenon.

Despite the need for further research, the current research combined with the FBI's (O'Toole, 2000) recommended framework for school threat and risk assessment procedures, and Virginia Tech's (2007) guide for response to disturbing writing, provide grounds for specific school recommendations around the phenomenon of violent writing. The FBI states that the only solution to effectively address potential threats to school safety is that of an "effective threat management system" with a "standardized method for evaluating threats" and "consistent policies" for response (O'Toole, 2000, p. 25). These standardized methods must involve the designation of a school district threat assessment coordinator. The coordinator can ensure a multi-step threat and risk assessment process for addressing violent writing. The researcher's recommendation is as follows (see Table 5.1):

Table 5.1

Violent Writing Threat Assessment Procedures

 Procedures for Addressing Violent Writing

1. School system designates a threat assessment coordinator
2. Threat assessment coordinator is well trained to recognize FBI identified warning signs of threats, including behavioral, written, or verbal threats
3. Coordinator prepares a training plan for the school system. The plan should adopt a train the trainer model with school-based counselors, social workers, and administrators trained in the district's comprehensive approach to school threat assessment. These school staff members in turn train school-based instructional and non-instructional staff. District training plan must involve specific attention to specialized training for English/ELA teachers.
4. Coordinator is trained to recognize the categories of the researcher's violent writing typology, to identify those requiring the most immediate attention, and to determine appropriate responses to each category. (Example: Direct threat writings must be submitted immediately to the principal. Fantasy violence with indirect threats and self-inflicted violent writing, especially suicidal writings, should be submitted to the school counselor or other school-based mental health staff who have been trained by the district coordinator in threat assessment procedures. Other categorical responses may vary).
5. Coordinator trains all school-based English and English Language Arts instructors in the violent writing typology and associated recommended response, with emphasis on the idea that even violent writings can be and most often are innocuous. Teacher training supports the idea that teachers alone should they determine a student's potential threat level. Instead, they need to understand the role of school point persons in helping them determine potential levels of threat/risk. A half day (3 hours) of training with specific writing examples and possible classroom scenarios is recommended.
6. With the exception of direct threat violent writing, classroom teachers are instructed to first address violent texts informally with the student. The purpose of this discussion is to make an initial determination about student intent and to provide information to the threat assessment point persons who become involved in the process. This recommendation follows Virginia Tech's approach to disturbing creative writing.
7. After discussion with the student, the teacher determines to make no further response, or to pursue a school-based threat and risk assessment process with the school point person. This process must involve communication with the parents and the students' other teachers.
8. The school-based threat assessment point person works with the district coordinator or district threat assessment staff to conduct an appropriate threat/risk assessment.

9.Results of assessment are shared with teacher, student, parent, etc. and proper responses given. The process for determining the threat level of violent writing should mirror the process used with violent or disturbing behaviors among youth.

10.Combined with attention to faculty/staff training, students and their parents must be made aware of the above recommended process for potential student threats, a recommendation emphasized by the FBI (O'Toole, 2000)

Conclusion

At the core of an exploration into the phenomenon of violent writing in a public school environment is a dilemma; a dilemma of appropriateness, response, and responsibility of the classroom teacher. The first concern for many writing instructors and English teachers is that of the appropriate place of violent writing. English instructors may question whether the allowance of personal writing evidences the highest level of academic standards within educational institutions. If they determine that such writing does not lend itself to appropriate academic consideration, and refuse to allow this voice, then the issue of censorship takes a significant place in the classroom. To this point Anderson and MacCurdy (2000) explain that the students we teach today are very different from the students of 30 years ago, and they often enter our classrooms presenting broken lives filled with painful experiences. Anderson and MacCurdy write:

Most recently, new levels of trauma resulting from children randomly attacking others at schools across the country have entered our cultural consciousness....Children who survive these and other kinds of overt and covert traumas become young adults, and many find their way into our classes, where the writing they do about what they have experienced challenges our practical, political, and theoretical assumptions about the power, place, and purposes of writing. The general inclination of our profession has long been to marginalize such disturbing

texts in favor of safer, more controlled discourses of the academy. To do so necessarily marginalizes, isolates, and alienates the writers who create those texts,..." (p. 2).

Anderson and MacCurdy's (2000) explanation of the challenges of personal, traumatic student writing highlights the dilemma of response. It is perhaps safer and easier to disallow personal voices to emerge in the classroom, but at what risk? If disallowing the personal and often violent voice isolates and alienates a student who needs to write of personal trauma in a way that helps him/her deal with what they have personally experienced, then how can one expect the student to engage in ongoing classroom study?

The final dilemma is that of the role of the teacher when confronted with questionable and often violent texts. As Morgan (1998) asks, "...how far do the responsibilities of a teacher extend, exactly?" (p. 324). As evidenced in chapter two, differing opinions about the role of the teacher when confronted with graphic, violent, or personal student texts make it challenging to provide definitive steps that can be used in every situation so that proper response is possible. The educational world often assumes the notion that prepared teachers are well trained teachers, but with violent writing, training is not an easy task. Violent writing (which may or may not be threatening) can assume many forms requiring varied responses. To specifically train teachers for the most appropriate response when confronted with violent writing will not prove to be an easy task, although it should be a necessary task.

Violent writing is challenging, confrontational, and potentially threatening, but it is also personal. Violent writing frequently emerges from the creative or traumatic lives of youth facing painful, horrific, and damaging life circumstances. To disallow this form of writing through classroom censorship potentially silences a voice that is already hurting,

questioning, and scared. Yet, embracing this student voice through an academic perspective that examines texts for academic progress rather than violent behavioral intentions holds the potential of educators failing to recognize texts that carry threatening and suggestive messages requiring higher levels of mental health and law enforcement intervention.

Addressing violent texts in academic environments is a complex task, but a task that now requires researchers to explore and provide insight and guidelines for teachers and schools on the front lines of this dilemma-ridden phenomenon. Our students, particularly North Carolina students, deserve well-trained educational professionals who understand, embrace, and question, when necessary, student right to free expression within the greater context of school safety. Even disgusting, aggressive, suggestive, horrifying, and violent student voices have earned the right to be heard; the question therefore becomes: how do we learn to listen and respond appropriately? Further research with the phenomenon of violent writing holds the potential to answer this question.

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Appendix A

Categories of Violent Writing

Category	Definition	Examples
Shock Effect & Gory Violence	Author/character describes gory details of behaviors designed to shock the reader but with no obvious threat implied	Examples include fictionalized Halloween stories with descriptions of chainsaw-wielding figures or details of dead/damaged bodies with bloody images. Examples can also include descriptions of animals or humans being mauled to death or autobiographical texts in which the writer describes the gory details of an accidental injury to his/her body (bones that were twisted in hurtful ways, bloody sores, etc).
Victim Violence	Author describes a real-life incident in which he/she was the victim of violence	Examples include: rape, abuse, being the victim of an assault, and bullying incidents. Such writing may occur in autobiographical texts including diaries/journals.
Self-Inflicted Violence	Author/character describes a desire to engage in <u>or</u> a previous attempt to bring harm/violence to self	Examples include suicide, self-mutilation, starvation, drinking to the point of illness, addictions, etc. Such writing may occur in autobiographical or creative writing texts.
Obsession Violence	Author/character describes a fascination with violent objects/subjects/themes yet <u>without</u> plans to use those items to bring harm to others	This type of writing is frequently found in research papers in which the writer chooses a violent theme, including violent music, movies, video games, weapons, torture techniques, and historical or popular cultural icons (Charles Manson, Adolf Hitler, etc.) Such themes can also be found in autobiographical texts focused on personal interests/hobbies like video games.
Fantasy Violence Containing Indirect Threats	Author/character describes wishful thoughts of bringing harm to other people but lacks a clear plan for how he/she might harm others. A vague threat is implied	Examples include descriptions of wanting to injure someone (like a teacher), burn down the school building, or watch someone die, but without specifics. Such writing often contains the phrase, “If I could I would...” or “One of these days I’m going to...” Such writing may occur in autobiographical texts, including journals, or as part of a creative writing selection.

Direct Threat Violence	Author/character provides <u>specific details</u> about how, when, and why a violent incident <u>will</u> occur	Examples include descriptions of a school shooting, a massacre, a murder, fight, or any type of intentional harm to others, etc. The writing may contain phrases like, "I will/want to..." and names targets, sites, etc. Such writing may be evidenced in autobiographical or creative writing texts.
Mixed Violence Category	Author/character provides a text that falls into more than one violent writing category.	Examples include writings that display evidence of more than one category of violent writing. It may, for example, include both obsession and direct threat violence. Or, it may start as a shock/effect writing that suddenly turns more graphic and specific, including direct or indirect threats.

Appendix B

Violent Writing Survey

DIRECTIONS: The following 36-question survey should take you approximately 15 minutes to complete. Your participation is voluntary and submission of the survey enters you into a drawing for one of 10 \$25.00 Visa debit cards. You can use the back and forward arrow buttons at the bottom of the screen to navigate. Enter your participant code below to get started.

Please enter your participant code in the box below. You will find your code in the email you recently received. The purpose of this code is to enter all participants in the gift card drawing. You will not be contacted by the researcher unless your code is drawn:

DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Please indicate your ethnicity

- ☐ Caucasian
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ African American
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Multiracial
- ☐ Native American

2. Are you...?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

3. How many total years of educational work experience do you have? (This can include both part-time and full-time work)

- ☐ Between 1-3 years
- ☐ Between 4-10 years
- ☐ Between 11-15 years
- ☐ Between 16-19 years
- ☐ 20 years or more of experience

4. Please indicate your level of English/ELA teaching licensure/certification:

- ☐ 4th-9th grade English or English Language Arts
- ☐ 6th-12th grade English or English Language Arts
- ☐ 9th-12th grade English or English Language Arts
- ☐ K-8th grade English or English Language Arts
- ☐ K-12 English Language Arts
- ☐ I am not licensed in the area of English or English Language Arts

5. In a typical school year, which English courses are you assigned to teach? Mark all that apply:

- ☐ English I
- ☐ English II
- ☐ English III
- ☐ English IV
- ☐ AP English Courses
- ☐ Remediation English Courses
- ☐ Journalism Courses
- ☐ Creative Writing Courses or Other English Electives

6. Which courses are you currently teaching?

- ☐ English I
- ☐ English II
- ☐ English III
- ☐ English IV
- ☐ AP English Courses
- ☐ Remediation English Courses
- ☐ Journalism Courses
- ☐ Creative Writing Courses or Other English Electives
- ☐ I am not currently teaching any English courses

7. Please indicate your school's scheduling structure:

- ☐ We are on a fairly traditional schedule and students take an English course for one full year
- ☐ We are on block scheduling and students complete an English course during one semester
- ☐ We are on a modified block scheduling (an A/B schedule) and students complete an English course during one full year.
- ☐ We are on a year-round school schedule

8. How would you classify your current school?

- ☐ Rural
- ☐ Urban

9. Approximately how many students in total will you teach this school year?

- ☐ 25 or fewer students
- ☐ 26-50 students
- ☐ 51-100 students
- ☐ 101-150 students
- ☐ 151-200 students
- ☐ More than 200 students

FREQUENCY, RESPONSE, AND PREPAREDNESS:

The remainder of this survey addresses your personal or potential encounters with student created violent writing in the classroom. Please read the definition below before proceeding to the remaining questions about categories of violent writing:

Violent writing is defined as autobiographical or fictional student writings or other renditions (drawings, etc.) containing descriptions of physical force or dangerous behavior against oneself or others resulting in physical, mental or emotional harm, and potentially indicative of violent or aggressive impulses that warrant closer attention by school, legal, or mental health professionals.

Please answer this series of questions about the category of SHOCK EFFECT AND GORY VIOLENT writing.

10. In a typical school year approximately how many examples of shock effect and gory violent writing do you personally encounter in the English classroom? In shock effect/gory violent writing the author/character describes gory details of behaviors designed to shock the reader but with no obvious threat implied. Examples include fictionalized Halloween stories with descriptions of chainsaw-wielding figures or dead/damaged bodies with bloody images. Examples can also include descriptions of animals or humans being mauled to death or autobiographical texts in which the writer describes the gory details of an accidental injury to his/her body (bones that were twisted in hurtful ways, bloody sores, etc).

- ☐ 0 Examples
- ☐ 1-5 Examples
- ☐ 6-10 Examples
- ☐ 11-20 Examples
- ☐ 21-30 Examples
- ☐ More than 30 Examples

(FILTER INSERTED HERE: RESPONDENTS WHO ANSWER 0 EXAMPLES

RECEIVE QUESTION 11A. RESPONDENTS INDICATING ONE OR MORE EXAMPLES RECEIVE QUESTION 11B).

11a. If you were to encounter shock effect and gory violent writing, what might be your primary / first response?

- ☐ I would treat the violent content like any other content and grade the student's work normally
- ☐ I would ignore the violent content and only grade aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I would address the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I would call the student's parent/guardian and/or hold a parent conference
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with another teacher
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss with school administrators
- ☐ I don't know what my first/primary response would be

11b. When you previously encountered shock effect and gory violent writing, what was your primary / first response?

- ☐ I treated the violent content like any other content and graded the student's work normally
- ☐ I ignored the violent content and only graded aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I addressed the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I called the parent/guardian and/or held a parent conference
- ☐ I contacted and/or discussed incident with another teacher
- ☐ I contacted and/or discussed incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I contacted and/or discussed the incident with school administrators

12. How prepared do you feel you are to deal with/respond to shock effect and gory violent writing?

- ☐ Not Prepared
- ☐ Minimally Prepared
- ☐ Fairly Well Prepared
- ☐ Very Well Prepared

Please answer this series of questions about the category of Victim Violence

13. In a typical school year approximately how many examples of victim violence student writing do you personally encounter in the English classroom? In victim violence the author describes a real-life incident in which he/she was the victim of violence. Examples include: rape, abuse, being the victim of an assault, and bullying incidents. Such writing may occur in autobiographical texts, including diaries/journals.

- ☐ 0 Examples
- ☐ 1-5 Examples
- ☐ 6-10 Examples
- ☐ 11-20 Examples
- ☐ 21-30 Examples
- ☐ More than 30 Examples

(FILTER INSERTED HERE)

14a. If you were to encounter victim violence writing, what might be your primary / first response?

- ☐ I would treat the violent content like any other content and grade the student's work normally
- ☐ I would ignore the violent content and only grade aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I would address the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I would call the student's parent/guardian and/or hold a parent conference
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with another teacher
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss the incident with school administrators
- ☐ I don't know what my primary/first response would be

14b. When you previously encountered victim violence what was your primary/first response?

- ☐ I treated the violent content like any other content and graded the student's work normally
- ☐ I ignored the violent content and only graded aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I addressed the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I called the parent/guardian and/or held a parent conference
- ☐ I contacted and/or discussed incident with another teacher
- ☐ I contacted and/or discussed incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I contacted and/or discussed the incident with school administrators

15. How prepared do you feel you are to deal with/respond to victim violence writing?

- ☐ Not prepared
- ☐ Minimally prepared
- ☐ Fairly well prepared
- ☐ Very well prepared

**Please respond to this series of questions about the category of SELF-
INFLICTED VIOLENCE writing**

16. In a typical school year approximately how many examples of self-inflicted violent student writing do you personally encounter in the English classroom? In self-inflicted violence writing the author/character describes a desire to engage in or a previous attempt to bring harm/violence to self. Examples include: suicide, self-mutilation, starvation, drinking to the point of illness, addictions, etc. Such writing may occur in autobiographical or creative writing texts.

- ☐ 0 Examples
- ☐ 1-5 Examples
- ☐ 6-10 Examples
- ☐ 11-20 Examples
- ☐ 21-30 Examples
- ☐ More than 30 Examples

(FILTER INSERTED HERE)

17a. If you were to encounter self-inflicted violence writing, what might be your primary / first response?

- ☐ I would treat the violent content like any other content and grade the student's work normally
- ☐ I would ignore the violent content and only grade aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I would address the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I would call the student's parent/guardian and/or hold a parent conference
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with another teacher
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss the incident with school administrators
- ☐ I don't know what my primary/first response would be

17b. When you previously encountered self-inflicted violence what was your primary/first response?

- ☐ I treated the violent content like any other content and graded the student's work normally
- ☐ I ignored the violent content and only graded aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I addressed the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I called the parent/guardian and/or held a parent conference
- ☐ I contacted and/or discussed incident with another teacher
- ☐ I contacted and/or discussed incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I contacted and/or discussed the incident with school administrators

18. How prepared do you feel you are to deal with/respond to self-inflicted violent writing?

- ☐ Not Prepared
- ☐ Minimally Prepared
- ☐ Fairly Well Prepared
- ☐ Very Well Prepared

**Please respond to this series of questions about the category of
OBSESSION VIOLENCE writing**

19. In a typical school year approximately how many examples of obsession violence student writing do you personally encounter in the English classroom? In obsession violence the author/character describes a fascination with violent objects / subjects / themes, yet without plans to use those items to bring harm to others. This type of writing is frequently found in research papers in which the writer chooses a violent theme, including violent music, movies, video games, weapons, torture techniques, and historical or popular cultural icons (Charles Manson, Adolf Hitler, etc.). Such themes can also be found in autobiographical texts focused on personal interests or hobbies like gaming.

- ☐ 0 Examples
- ☐ 1-5 Examples
- ☐ 6-10 Examples
- ☐ 11-20 Examples
- ☐ 21-30 Examples
- ☐ More than 30 Examples

(FILTER INSERTED HERE)

20a. If you were to encounter obsession violence writing, what might be your primary / first response?

- ☐ I would treat the violent content like any other content and grade the student's work normally
- ☐ I would ignore the violent content and only grade aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I would address the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I would call the student's parent/guardian and/or hold a parent conference
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with another teacher
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss the incident with school administrators
- ☐ I don't know what my primary/first response would be

20b. When you previously encountered obsession violence writing, what was your primary / first response?

- ☐ I treated the violent content like any other content and graded the student's work normally
- ☐ I ignored the violent content and only graded aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I addressed the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I called the parent/guardian and/or held a parent conference
- ☐ I contacted and/or discussed incident with another teacher
- ☐ I contacted and/or discussed incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I contacted and/or discussed the incident with school administrators

21. How prepared do you feel you are to deal with/respond to obsession violence writing?

- ☐ Not Prepared
- ☐ Minimally Prepared
- ☐ Fairly Well Prepared
- ☐ Very Well Prepared

Please respond to this series of questions about the category of FANTASY VIOLENCE CONTAINING INDIRECT THREATS

22. In a typical school year approximately how many examples of fantasy violence containing indirect threats student writing do you personally encounter in the English classroom? In fantasy violence containing indirect threats the author/character describes wishful thoughts of bringing harm to other people, but lacks a clear plan for how to accomplish that. A vague threat is implied. Examples include descriptions of wanting to injure someone (like a teacher), burn down the school building, or watch someone die, but without specifics. Such writing often contains the phrase, "If I could I would..." or "One of these days I'm going to..." Such writing may occur in autobiographical texts, including journals, or as part of a creative writing selection.

- ☐ 0 Examples
- ☐ 1-5 Examples
- ☐ 6-10 Examples
- ☐ 11-20 Examples
- ☐ 21-30 Examples
- ☐ More than 30 Examples

(FILTER INSERTED HERE)

23a. If you were to encounter fantasy violence containing indirect threats writing, what might be your primary / first response?

- ☐ I would treat the violent content like any other content and grade the student's work normally
- ☐ I would ignore the violent content and only grade aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I would address the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I would call the students parent/guardian and/or hold a parent conference
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with another teacher
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss the incident with school administrators
- ☐ I don't know what my primary/first response would be

23b. When you previously encountered fantasy violence containing indirect threats writing, what was your primary / first response?

- ☐ I would treat the violent content like any other content and grade the student's work normally
- ☐ I would ignore the violent content and only grade aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I would address the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I would call the students parent/guardian and/or hold a parent conference
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with another teacher
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss the incident with school administrators
- ☐ I don't know what my primary/first response would be

24. How prepared do you feel you are to deal with/respond to fantasy violence containing indirect threats writing?

- ☐ Not Prepared
- ☐ Minimally Prepared
- ☐ Fairly Well Prepared
- ☐ Very Well Prepared

**Please respond to this series of questions about the category of DIRECT
THREAT VIOLENCE**

25. In a typical school year approximately how many examples of direct threat violent student writing do you personally encounter in the English classroom? In direct threat violence writing the author/character provides specific details about how / when / why a violent incident will occur. Examples include descriptions of a school shooting, a massacre, a murder, fight, or any type of intentional harm to others, etc. The writing may contain phrases like, "I will/want to..." Such writing may be evidenced in autobiographical or creative writing texts.

- ☐ 0 Examples
- ☐ 1-5 Examples
- ☐ 6-10 Examples
- ☐ 11-20 Examples
- ☐ 21-30 Examples
- ☐ More than 30 Examples

(FILTER INSERTED HERE)

26a. If you were to encounter direct threat writing what might be your primary / first response?

- ☐ I would treat the violent content like any other content and grade the student's work normally
- ☐ I would ignore the violent content and only grade aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I would address the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I would call the students parent/guardian and/or hold a parent conference
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with another teacher
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss the incident with school administrators
- ☐ I don't know what my primary/first response would be

26b. When you previously encountered direct threat writing, what was your primary / first response?

- ☐ I would treat the violent content like any other content and grade the student's work normally
- ☐ I would ignore the violent content and only grade aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I would address the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I would call the student's parent/guardian and/or hold a parent conference
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with another teacher
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss the incident with school administrators
- ☐ I don't know what my primary/first response would be

27. How prepared do you feel you are to deal with/respond to direct threat violence writing?

- ☐ Not Prepared
- ☐ Minimally Prepared
- ☐ Fairly Well Prepared
- ☐ Very Well Prepared

Please respond to this series of questions about the category of MIXED VIOLENCE WRITING

28. In a typical school year approximately how many examples of mixed violence student writing do you personally encounter in the English classroom? In mixed violence writing the author/character provides a text that falls into more than one violent writing category. Such writing may, for example, include both obsession and direct threat violence. Or, it may start out as a shock effect/gory type of writing that suddenly turns more graphic and specific, including direct or indirect threats.

- ☐ 0 Examples
- ☐ 1-5 Examples
- ☐ 6-10 Examples
- ☐ 11-20 Examples
- ☐ 21-30 Examples
- ☐ More than 30 Examples

(FILTER INSERTED HERE)

29a. If you were to encounter mixed violence writing what might be your primary / first response?

- ☐ I would treat the violent content like any other content and grade the student's work normally
- ☐ I would ignore the violent content and only grade aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I would address the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I would call the students parent/guardian and/or hold a parent conference
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with another teacher
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss the incident with school administrators
- ☐ I don't know what my primary/first response would be

29b. When you previously encountered mixed violence writing, what was your primary / first response?

- ☐ I would treat the violent content like any other content and grade the student's work normally
- ☐ I would ignore the violent content and only grade aspects of grammar and style
- ☐ I would address the text with the student, either through a verbal conversation or a written response on the paper
- ☐ I would call the students parent/guardian and/or hold a parent conference
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with another teacher
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss incident with a guidance counselor or other mental health provider
- ☐ I would contact and/or discuss the incident with school administrators
- ☐ I don't know what my primary/first response would be

30. How prepared do you feel you are to deal with/respond to mixed violence writing?

- ☐ Not Prepared
- ☐ Minimally Prepared
- ☐ Fairly Well Prepared
- ☐ Very Well Prepared

OPEN RESPONSE QUESTIONS

31. Please describe in brief terms (no student or school names) the type and amount of violent student writing that you see in a typical school year. You may include a description of the type of student who produces such texts, the classes taught in which you see the most incidents, or the types of assignments that seem to evoke the most violent writing.

32. Please briefly describe a personal English classroom encounter with any type of violent writing. First quote the student's wording (if you remember), and then describe your response in as much detail as possible. Refrain from using school/student names or describing incidents involving student reported child abuse or neglect. Leave question blank if you have no response.

33. In a brief sentence or two, why do you sometimes feel "not prepared" or "minimally prepared" to respond to violent writing? Leave question blank if you never feel that way.

TRAINING & POLICY QUESTIONS

34. Have you ever received any professional development or training specifically related to teacher response to disturbing or violent writing?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

FILTER INSERTED HERE: PARTICIPANTS WHO RESPONDED "YES" ON PRIOR QUESTION RECEIVE QUESTION 34a.

34a. Please describe the type and length of training received.

--

35. Does your school or school district currently have a policy (either a stand alone policy or one that is part of a larger "Safe Schools Plan") that addresses violent student writing or the matter of teacher/school response to disturbing or violent student writing/products?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know

36. As a classroom English teacher respond to this statement: I believe that my school or district should maintain a policy that addresses teacher response to violent student writing and or products.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

In order for your survey responses to be recorded, please make sure that you click on the arrow in the lower right hand corner at this time. You should then receive a message indicating that your responses have been recorded. If you do not see that message, then your survey results will not be sent to the researcher. Please click on the arrow now to send your survey responses, and thank you for participating in this research process.

Appendix C

Letter of Explanation North Carolina Superintendents

February 19, 2010

TO ALL NORTH CAROLINA PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS:

My name is Lori Brown and I am an educator in _____ and a doctoral candidate at Western Carolina University. I am writing to inform you of my intention to randomly survey North Carolina high school English teachers for the collection of relevant dissertation data.

My dissertation research involves a study of 9th-12th grade English teacher encounters with and responses to student-created violent texts. Specifically, I seek to answer the question of whether schools or school systems need to consider adopting a policy of response regarding violent and potentially troubling student writing. Data collection involves a researcher-created survey instrument that has been piloted and rigorously tested for reliability status. The survey includes questions designed to gather data on frequency of encounters, responses to, and perception of individual preparedness to respond to violent student texts. A copy of the cover letter and survey follows this letter of explanation.

Teacher responses will be **reported confidentially**, with results reported in an aggregate form. **No identifying teacher, school, or LEA names will be known to anyone beyond the researcher, as this is not a study of any particular LEA or school.** I can assure you that this dissertation research involves the highest standard of ethical behavior. No teacher will be required to complete the survey, and they may exit the study at any time.

I would like to notify you that starting _____(date), I will randomly select approximately 351 NC 9th-12th grade English teachers from across the state to survey, as based on data from NCDPI. Some of your district teachers may be selected, but due to the random nature of selection, you may have no one in the study. If for any reason, you do not want your English teachers included in the pool of potential survey participants, please notify me in writing by _____(date). You may contact me via e-mail: _____ or regular mail. There is no need to contact me if you do not have questions or concerns.

If you have any additional questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me via phone (xxx-xxx-xxxx) or e-mail. Thank you for your support of this dissertation research endeavor.

Lori Brown, Doctoral Candidate
Western Carolina University

Appendix D

Pre-Notice Letter

Date:

Participant ID Number: _____

Dear High School English Teacher:

This letter is sent to notify you that within the next 7 days, you will receive a survey asking for your online participation. The survey is part of my doctoral studies at Western Carolina University. I work in ____ as a grant writer, and previously worked as a high school teacher and administrator. The study focuses on the topic of student-generated violent writing in the high school English classroom. The purpose of my study is collect data on the frequency of incidents, responses to, and perception of teacher preparedness for appropriately responding to violent student writings in the high school English classroom.

Your survey will be identified with a participant ID number, instead of your name, so that results are reported confidentially. The survey can be completed online or via a paper copy. If you would prefer to complete a paper copy of the survey, please send an e-mail to ____ within the next two days. You will provide your informed consent for study participation through your completion of the survey, and may choose to discontinue your involvement at any time.

Please complete the survey by _____2010. It will take you approximately 15 minutes to complete all questions. As a token of my appreciation to those who complete the survey, all participants will be entered into a drawing to win one of ten \$25.00 Visa Debit Cards.

I recognize that your personal and professional schedules are very busy, as time is a rare and precious commodity for educators, but your participation in this study could prove to be invaluable. There has been little empirical research in the selected topic of interest, and the results of this study could begin to inform policy and performance discussions regarding English teacher encounters with violent student texts. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or my chairperson at WCU (contact information is below).

Sincerely,

Lori D. Brown
Ed.D Student – WCU

Contact Information Included

Appendix E

Pilot Study Notification Letter and Information Sheet

Dear _____ County English Teacher:

I am writing to invite you to participate in a pilot study focused on the topic of violent writing in the English classroom. As a _____ educator and doctoral student at Western Carolina University, I am completing a study entitled: *Violent Writing: A Quantitative Examination of an Unexplored High School Phenomenon*. The pilot study is designed to ensure the quality of the survey instrument that I have created.

The purpose of my study is collect data on the frequency of incidents, responses to, and perception of teacher preparedness for appropriately responding to violent student writings in the high school English classroom. As we all know, the 2007 Virginia Tech tragedy spotlighted the dilemma faced by educators confronted with violent student writing that is potentially indicative of violent behaviors. Yet, the spotlight on this important topic has not led to in-depth quantitative research at the secondary level. By participating in this pilot study, you are helping break new ground on a previously unexplored high school English classroom phenomenon.

Upon your completion of the online-survey, you will be asked a series of 5 questions designed to assist me in determining the clarity or confusion presented by any survey questions. Please understand that your participation is strictly voluntary, and that you provide informed consent to participate by choosing to complete the survey. Additionally, your identity will remain confidential at all times, and no one except for me will view your responses. The information obtained from this pilot study will **NOT** be shared with your school district. The survey should take you approximately 15 minutes to complete.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me (Lori D. Brown) or my dissertation chair, Dr. Frederick Buskey at Western Carolina University (WCU). If you have concerns regarding your treatment during this process, you may also contact the IRB chairperson at WCU. All contact information is below. Thank you for your assistance with this pilot study. I very much appreciate your time and attention to this research study.

To begin the pilot study survey, please click here:

Sincerely,

Lori D. Brown
Ed.D Student – Western Carolina University

Contact Information Included

INFORMATION SHEET

RISKS AND BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE CURRENT RESEARCH STUDY

Dear Participant:

This information sheet is designed to provide you with information regarding the potential risks and benefits of participating in the current research study. The survey asks you to recall prior incidents with violent student writing, an act that may cause you to feel uncomfortable. I acknowledge that the recall of potentially disturbing and graphically violent student writings may cause a feeling of distress. In the event that you experience this reaction, please contact me immediately for a connection to your Local Management Entity (LME), which falls under the umbrella of the North Carolina Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services. Your local LME can provide resources for counseling, psychological help, etc. I will assist you in making that direct contact if needed (all of my contact information is below).

Additionally, you may worry about the sharing of violent student writings that involve illegal activity or reportable behaviors. State law requires teachers to report incidents of student abuse. For your protection and mine, please refrain on open-ended questions from providing details about student writings or your responses to writings that involved student abuse or neglect (example: a student provides a journal entry about physical abuse in his/her home). Please remember that all of your responses are confidential, and provided there is no report of abuse, nothing you share with me could result in a need to report a student's writing. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or emotionally distressed, please remember you have the option to end the survey and exit the study.

The benefit of participating in the current study rests is that you are providing important information for a quantitative analysis of the phenomenon of violent writing in the secondary English classroom. You are helping to navigate previously unexplored territory. The information that you share will enable me to determine common trends/patterns regarding violent student writing and teacher response; a step that is designed to eventually frame a deeper discussion around teacher practice and potential violence.

Lori Brown, Ed.D Candidate
Western Carolina University

Contact Information Included

Appendix F

Pilot Study Follow-Up Questions

Please answer the following questions after completing the on-line survey:

- 1) Which questions, if any, on the survey did you find confusing or unclear?

- 2) Which questions, if any, seemed inappropriate or made you feel very uncomfortable when answering?

- 3) Which questions, if any, left you thinking that you wanted more answer choices?

- 4) Approximately how long did it take you to complete the survey?

- 5) Are there any other comments that you would like to add regarding the survey instrument?
If so, please feel free to speak openly in the space below.

Thank you for your participation in this pilot study.

Appendix G

Sample Survey Notification Letter and Information Sheet

Date _____

Participant ID Number: _____

Dear High School English Teacher:

You are invited to participate in a research study that I am conducting as a doctoral student enrolled at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, NC, under the direction of Dr. Frederick Buskey. The survey is designed to be completed by North Carolina high school (9th-12th grade) English teachers. If you are not a 9th-12th grade English teacher, please do not complete the survey. You were randomly selected to complete this study, and your superintendent was previously informed of the research study.

Your involvement in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to decline participation or exit the study at any time, with no consequences for doing so. Your completion of the survey is indicative of your informed consent for participation. An ID number will be assigned to each of your survey results, in order to provide you with confidentiality. **Teacher, school, or LEA names will not be utilized or known to anyone beyond the researcher**, as data will be presented in aggregate form to show state trends/patterns. Your survey responses will remain locked in the researcher's file cabinet for a period of three years, at which point data will be destroyed.

Again, let me emphasize that your identity will remain confidential and survey results will be reported in terms of general state patterns/trends. The benefit of your participation in the study is that you will be a part of expanding the educational discussion around potentially threatening violent student writings. There is no risk to you or your district for your participation in the study, although I recognize that recalling prior incidents with violent student writing may create feelings of psychological distress.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact me (Lori D. Brown) or my dissertation chair (Dr. Frederick Buskey). Additionally, if you have concerns regarding how you are treated as a research participant, you can contact the IRB Committee Chairperson at Western Carolina University. All contact information is below.

Thank you, Lori D. Brown
Contact Information Included

The Survey Web Link is: _____ Due Date: _____

INFORMATION SHEET

RISKS AND BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE CURRENT RESEARCH STUDY

Dear Participant:

This information sheet is designed to provide you with information regarding the potential risks and benefits of participating in the current research study. The survey asks you to recall prior incidents with violent student writing, an act that may cause you to feel uncomfortable. I acknowledge that the recall of potentially disturbing and graphically violent student writings may cause a feeling of distress. In the event that you experience this reaction, please contact me immediately for a connection to your Local Management Entity (LME), which falls under the umbrella of the North Carolina Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services. Your local LME can provide resources for counseling, psychological help, etc. I will assist you in making that direct contact if needed (all of my contact information is below).

Additionally, you may worry about the sharing of violent student writings that involve illegal activity or reportable behaviors. State law requires teachers to report incidents of student abuse. For your protection and mine, please refrain on open-ended questions from providing details about student writings or your responses to writings that involved student abuse or neglect (example: a student provides a journal entry about physical abuse in his/her home). Please remember that all of your responses are confidential, and provided there is no report of abuse, nothing you share with me could result in a need to report a student's writing. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or emotionally distressed, please remember you have the option to end the survey and exit the study.

The benefit of participating in the current study rests is that you are providing important information for a quantitative analysis of the phenomenon of violent writing in the secondary English classroom. You are helping to navigate previously unexplored territory. The information that you share will enable me to determine common trends/patterns regarding violent student writing and teacher response; a step that is designed to eventually frame a deeper discussion around teacher practice and potential violence.

Lori Brown, Ed.D Candidate
Western Carolina University

Contact Information Included

Appendix H

Thank You Letter

Dear Participant:

Thank you for completing my doctoral survey on violent writing. I realize that you took time out of your busy schedule to engage in this research process with me, and for that, I am most grateful. I wish you a successful ending to the school year.

If you would like to receive a copy of the final data analysis, you can contact me at e-mail _____:

Thank you, Lori D. Brown
Contact Information Included

Appendix I

First Reminder

Dear High School English Teacher:

As per the letter and survey instructions e-mailed to you on (date), you have been selected to complete a survey on the frequency of and teacher response to student violent writing in the high school English classroom.

If you have not completed the survey, please consider doing so very soon, as information from high school English teachers like yourself is critical to the ultimate success of this research study.

The online web-based survey consists of 37 questions that can be completed in approximately 15 minutes. Please remember that your survey answers will be reported confidentially and your identity will not be revealed. I encourage you to answer all questions truthfully and to the best of your ability. Thank you for your participation in this research study.

In the event that do not have access to the previous e-mail with the survey web address, I am including it again: http://_____.
Please remember that I need your completed survey response by (date)_____.

If you have questions, you may contact me or my dissertation chair (Dr. Frederick Buskey) at any time. If you have concerns regarding your treatment during this process, you may also contact the IRB chairperson at WCU. All contact information is below. Thank you for your involvement with this survey.

Lori D. Brown, Ed.D. Student
Western Carolina University

Appendix J

Second Reminder

Dear _____:

_____ weeks ago you received an e-mail with instructions for completing a doctoral study survey on the topic of student violent writing in the high school English classroom. Your participation in this survey is voluntary, but sincerely requested.

You can complete the survey online at: http:_____. It will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Please remember that your results will be reported confidentially so that your name or your LEA name will not be known.

Thank you for giving this survey your attention. I very much appreciate you taking the time out of your busy personal and professional schedules to participate in this exciting research endeavor. As a public school educator myself, I know that surveys can seem like “one more thing to do,” but I hope that you will consider completing this survey and participating in a relatively new area of research.

Sincerely,

Lori D. Brown